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https://dx.doi.org/10.21220/s2-ybnx-7888

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Landscapes of Silence at the First Baptist Church

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Newport News, Virginia

Bachelor of Arts, College of William & Mary, 2016

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary in
Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Anthropology

College of William & Mary
May 2023

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APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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COMPLIANCE PAGE

Research approved by

Protection of Human Subjects Committee (PHSC)

Protocol number(s): PHSC-2022-11-09-15925-vrgum

Date(s) of approval: 2022-11-21

ABSTRACT

The Historic Area of Colonial Williamsburg is often presented as a “town which time passed by” (Yetter 1988:30). This narrative implies that the museum landscape reflects the actual past and that restoration efforts simply returned the town to the way it used to be. However, the Restoration was accomplished according to specific ideological goals. Colonial Williamsburg was created as a shrine to traditionalist, conservative values (Greenspan 2002; Handler & Gable 1997; Lindgren 1989; Lindgren 1993) which are intrinsically linked to the global structure of systemic White supremacy. These values were enacted during the Restoration, as Black residents of the future Historic Area were underpaid for their property and displaced into segregated neighborhoods. They were also inscribed in the physical museum landscape and in the development of historic interpretation. In the past few decades, Colonial Williamsburg has attempted to bring silenced histories to light through increased dedication to African-American interpretation. Still, this history of erasure goes largely unacknowledged by the Foundation.

In this thesis, I use the First Baptist Church as a case study to demonstrate how Black history was silenced by the Restoration and how an ongoing archaeological project works to resituate the site within the museum landscape. I discuss the history of the church from its founding in 1776 through the present day, with special emphasis on the displacement in 1957 and the tropes of silencing (Trouillot 2015 [1995]) utilized in the creation of the museum landscape. The installation of interpretive infrastructure adjacent to the site in the 1960s and 1990s recognized the historic significance of the First Baptist site while simultaneously continuing the erasure of Colonial Williamsburg’s role in the church’s destruction. The 2020-2023 archaeological project incorporates community voices in the (re)interpretation of the site and provides an opportunity for Colonial Williamsburg to acknowledge its own history of racism and dispossession.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ii

List of Figures iii

Chapter 1. Introduction 1

Chapter 2. Anthropology and White Supremacy 7

Chapter 3. Making History at Colonial Williamsburg 14

Chapter 4. History of the First Baptist Church: 1776 to Present 34

Chapter 5. Silencing History at the First Baptist Church 61

Chapter 6. Undoing Silences and Looking to the Future 74

Bibliography 84

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to many individuals involved in the First Baptist Church excavation project, including members of the First Baptist descendant community and members of the Colonial Williamsburg Department of Archaeological Research. Thank you to Connie Harshaw, Christine Jordan, Jacquelyn Gardner, Dennis Gardner, Johnette Weaver, the individual referred to in this thesis as anonymous, and many other members of the First Baptist community who gave their time to speak with me about the history of the church and their experience of the 2020-2023 archaeological project. At Colonial Williamsburg, thank you to Rev. James Ingram, Jack Gary, Meredith Poole, Dr. Eric Schweickart, and Katie Wagner, and to my fellow field techs, including Lauren McDonald, DéShondra Dandridge, Hannah James, and Kyle Brubaker. Thank you for your friendship over the past three years.

I also wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Michael Blakey, Dr. Audrey Horning, and Dr. Joseph Jones for their guidance during this research process. And finally, to Waverly Garner - I couldn't ask for a more supportive partner. Thank you for being you.

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Architectural renderings showing the two-stage construction of the original Nassau Street church. 38
2. The second church on the Nassau Street site, constructed 1856 and photographed c.1900. 43
3. The 1856 church at the time of the Restoration (c.1930). 47
4. The Scotland Street church, constructed 1956. 49
5. Stained glass fragments from the area west of the 1856 church. 55
6. Map showing the location of the first and second churches in relation to the cemetery. 56
7. An archaeologist excavates the c.1805 and 1856 church foundations during the 1957 excavation. 65
8. 1957 archaeology trench re-excavated in 2021 showing disturbance to grave shaft features. 67
9. Location of interpretive sign in relation to the actual location of the church. 71

Introduction

I worked as an archaeological field technician at the First Baptist Church site from the initial phase of the excavation in September 2020 until beginning my graduate studies in August 2021. I returned to the site in August and September 2022 to assist with the excavation of three burials and again in January through March 2023 to help delineate the cemetery boundaries and finish out the project. During my time at the First Baptist site, I was impressed by the scale of community collaboration and the emphasis placed on us as excavators to work *for* the community. I also became aware of forces that competed with that primary goal. As employees of Colonial Williamsburg, there were strict expectations for our interactions with guests. We were researchers, but like all front-line employees we were also tasked with catering to guests and – most importantly – donors. When we spoke of the project, we could be honest about our personal experiences, but we could not speak *for* the Foundation. There was an unspoken pressure not to be overly critical of Colonial Williamsburg.

Many of us became disillusioned with our archaeological forbears over the course of the project. We had been hired to help Colonial Williamsburg put the church's history back onto the landscape – but Colonial Williamsburg also caused its displacement barely half a century ago. It was Colonial Williamsburg that bought the property only two weeks after the church initiated a construction project to expand their building. It was Colonial Williamsburg that bulldozed the church building in its 100th year. And it was Colonial Williamsburg that concealed the site from public view by installing a parking lot over the church ruins even after locating both 18th-century foundations and a cemetery on the site.

The archaeological field technicians discussed these themes amongst ourselves and, to an extent, with guests. Still, the pressure to avoid alienating donors was always present. We were able to have long, deep, and meaningful conversations with many visitors to the site, but those interactions were not the norm.[1] When guests only interacted with interpretive signage or had short conversations with volunteers, they received information almost entirely focused on the current project. Without more involved conversation with archaeologists, the Foundation’s role in the church’s destruction was rarely engaged.

In this thesis, I draw upon my own personal experience, including my work at the First Baptist site, participation in community meetings and events, and conversations with community members, tourists, and my fellow Colonial Williamsburg employees. I also engage with literature on anthropological ethics, specifically works surrounding the study of sites associated with African-American history and those that propose methods for more equitable, antiracist anthropological practice. This work is intended to be a reflection on the history of archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg and an analysis of the values written into the museum landscape itself. It is also meant as a critique of current practice at Colonial Williamsburg, specifically regarding discourse surrounding the Restoration of the early 20th century. However, the ongoing, collaborative project at the First Baptist site is a hopeful sign for the future of research at Colonial Williamsburg.

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[1] For more discussion of guest interactions at the First Baptist site, see Renshaw (2022).

For a broad study of Colonial Williamsburg's practices of historical production and interpretation, as well as its larger regional context, I recommended *The New History in an Old Museum* (Handler & Gable 1997). Eric Gable and Richard Handler have published numerous studies of historical production and interpretive practices at Colonial Williamsburg (see also Gable & Handler 1993; 1996). Their work focuses primarily on daily practice at Colonial Williamsburg in the 20th century and on the museum's approach to 18th-century history. Here, I will focus on a different period of Colonial Williamsburg history: the "Restoration" of the early 20th century and the creation of the museum itself. I have chosen to focus on the First Baptist site as a specific case study.

In the context of Colonial Williamsburg, the word "Restoration" is used to refer to both a time period and a historical process. When used as a temporal designation, it most often refers to a period of fifteen or twenty years beginning in c.1924. The other usage refers to the process by which the present-day Historic Area was transformed from an active townscape to a museum. Discussions of the Restoration often treat this phenomenon as though it has an end point. To the contrary, it is an active, ongoing process by which the museum is continuously (re)shaped based on information brought forth through documentary, architectural, and archaeological investigations. These changes are manifested in a wide variety of ways, from the construction of new buildings to subtle shifts in interpretive practices.

I view the 20th-century history of the First Baptist site as one of displacement and erasure based upon a global system of White supremacy.[2] In the chapters that follow, I hope to demonstrate how the creation of Colonial Williamsburg and specifically the development of the museum landscape at the site of the First Baptist Church was structured by systems of racist thought.

Chapter 2 introduces the main themes of this work, including White supremacy and epistemological violence. I discuss the history of anthropology as a scientific field intricately tied to the social construction of race and the maintenance of White supremacist frameworks. I also discuss African Diasporic anthropology, as well as postcolonial and decolonizing movements which fight against systemic and epistemological racism. These concepts will inform my later analysis of archaeological projects at the First Baptist site.

---

[2] Throughout this thesis I refer to racial categories, primarily using the terms “White” and “Black.” Race is, of course, not a biological reality. It is a social category which was constructed differently in different times and places throughout history. Within these specific contexts, the social construct of race has very real effects on the lives of individuals. My use of “White” and “Black” in this work reflects the predominant understanding of racial classification in the United States, not to reinforce it as a natural category but to recognize its importance in shaping the lives of individuals in this country. I also occasionally use the term “non-White” to emphasize the ways in which Whiteness is positioned as normative and superior to the exclusion of all other groups.

My main focus in this research is the displacement of the First Baptist Church and Colonial Williamsburg's subsequent treatment of the Nassau Street site. In Chapter 3, I contextualize these events by discussing the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg as a process of historical production. The landscape of Colonial Williamsburg is an interpretive tool in and of itself, and the story it tells is composed of complex layers of mentions and silences shaped by White supremacist values. These mentions and silences are also woven into narratives of the Restoration and the ways that the museum is perceived. However, many Colonial Williamsburg employees work hard to ensure that a more inclusive history is brought to the forefront of interpretation. I conclude Chapter 3 with a brief discussion of archaeological research and multivocal interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg. In the past few decades, several community-engaged projects have demonstrated that the museum is willing to engage at some level in collaborative research.

Chapter 4 presents a brief history of the First Baptist Church. This history recognizes that the church is not just a place or a building; it is a community. First Baptist Church has existed at multiple locations throughout its nearly 250-year history, and it is alive and thriving today. To that end, I discuss the history of the church after it moved to Scotland Street in addition to describing the events that transpired at the Nassau Street site. I begin with the congregation's inception in 1776 and trace its history until the present day.

This chapter draws upon a variety of sources, including findings from the 2020-2023 archaeological excavation.

In Chapter 5, I present my analysis of the 20th-century landscape of the First Baptist Church site. Drawing on Trouillot's work on silencing and erasure (2015 [1995]), I examine the layers of mentions and silences that create the First Baptist site. I focus specifically on narratives of Colonial Williamsburg's Restoration and the conversion of the landscape from a place of worship to an imposed blank space within a historic landscape. I also discuss the ways in which the site's history was conveyed through interpretive infrastructure beginning in the 1990s, and how that interpretation continued to silence the history of displacement.

In Chapter 6, I conclude by reflecting on the continuing restoration of the church site. I explore how the current archaeological project and future reconstruction of the church are resituating the site within the historic landscape. I also discuss the need for historical interpretation that acknowledges historical processes of violence within the museum. In the next few years, the interpretive choices made at the Nassau Street site will demonstrate how willing the museum truly is to take responsibility for its past.

Anthropology and White Supremacy

White supremacy is a global power system intrinsically linked to racism, patriarchy, and capitalism. This system has its roots in European colonialism beginning in the 15th century (Trouillot 1991; Bonds & Inwood 2016; Beliso-de Jesús & Pierre 2019). However, the system of White supremacy that exists today is not simply a legacy of historical events. Rather, it is continuously and consistently reproduced in the present (Trouillot 2015 [1995]; Bonds & Inwood 2016). “Whiteness” is a social construct, and exactly which groups are considered to be White changes through time (Blakey 2020; Bonds & Inwood 2016; Trouillot 1991; Trouillot 2015 [1995]). What remains consistent is the basic structure of White supremacy: a binary between White as the unmarked, normative category (“us”) and non-White as an inferior, less-developed subset of humanity (“them”) (Fanon 1963; Blakey 2020).

Like other Western scientific disciplines, the field of anthropology was built on this White supremacist foundation. Willis (1969) argues that anthropology is best defined not by theoretical approach or fieldwork practices but as “the social science that studies dominated colored peoples – and their ancestors – living outside the boundaries of modern white societies” (1969:123). This structure, whether it is conscious or not in the minds of anthropologists, perpetuates a fundamental division between White scientists and people of color who are treated as objects of inquiry. This divide is apparent throughout the history of anthropological practice. In the 19th century, polygeny – the idea that different human races were descended from different species – was so prevalent that it became known as the “American school of anthropology” (Gould 1981).

Anthropological practice is not simply influenced by global White supremacy. It has also been an active tool of domination, used to reinforce systems of discrimination and subjugation. Mainstream White anthropology was used to justify race-based chattel slavery and to attempt to prove a biological basis for racial inequality (Blakey 2020; Gould 1981). The othering and objectification of non-White bodies is also prevalent throughout the history of biological and archaeological anthropology.

In the academic sphere, White supremacist structures are reified in the canon taught in university programs and cited in professional writing, enacted through the sequestration of scientific authority in White academia, and perpetuated through the exclusion of non-White voices from scholarly discourse (Blakey 2020; Harrison 1997 [1991]; Beliso-de Jesús & Pierre 2020; Trouillot 2015 [1995]). What is more, Black intellectuals’ contributions, both in specific works and to the field as a whole, often go uncited by their White colleagues:

> They omit Black scholars’ empathy, diasporic intellectual influences, and [their] professional innovations (descendant community, ethical clientage, linguistic derivatives like “enslaved Africans” replacing “slave”

> in literature, methodological innovations…and findings) (Blakey 2020:S193).

When innovations by Black scholars are utilized without proper citation or misappropriated, those scholars are effectively erased from academic discourse. The lack of diversity in the anthropological canon creates the illusion that anthropology has historically been (and largely remains) a field reserved for White, Western thought. To the contrary, Black scholars have been challenging racist scholarship for centuries. In 1854, Frederick Douglass delivered an address entitled “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered.” As the title indicates, this piece is explicitly anthropological in scope. It is also a challenge to the mainstream, racist, White anthropology of the time, an argument for the monogenesis of the human species, and a statement of moral imperative. At the outset, Douglass makes it clear that “the neutral scholar is an ignoble man” and that “there is no neutral ground. He that is not for us, is against us” (1950 [1854]:282-283). This rejection of the idea of scientific neutrality is a hallmark of African Diasporic anthropology.

Blakey (2020) differentiates between two types of “objectivity.” The first, or objectivity 1, refers to the methodical collection and analysis of data which is the defining factor in scientific inquiry. Objectivity 2 refers to the unachievable ideal of science that is completely free from subjectivity and bias. Data become meaningful through interpretation, and interpretation is a practice that takes place within specific historical and cultural contexts (Blakey

2020; Gould 1981). True objectivity 2 is impossible to achieve, yet it remains prevalent as a scientific ideal and thus continuing to exclude the voices of those who are closest to the subject at hand (Blakey 2020; Baker 1998).

When Whiteness is positioned as normative, all other categories are set off or “marked” as different and presumably inferior. This is a systemic issue that applies to all facets of society, as evidenced by terms such as African-American or Asian-American (but rarely Euro-American). Similarly, the unmarked “history” often refers to Eurocentric narratives, while “Black history” and other ethnic categories are marked off as separate. By extension, this allows narratives of Black history to be excluded from generic “history” and perpetuates the privileging of Whiteness.

The “decolonizing” movement (Harrison 1997), led by Black and Indigenous scholars, works to open up the field to previously-excluded voices, incorporate non-Western forms of knowledge, and challenge Eurocentric dichotomies and the notion of pure objectivity. It also requires scholars to expose injustices in the past, to work with and empower communities, and to recognize the continued presence of historic systems of oppression, including those perpetuated by anthropological scholarship. Anthropologists have the ability to actively work against racist historical narratives, “to examine what has been recorded and uncover what has been silenced” (Coronil 2019:54).

Self-critique and reflective practice are key to ethical research, as is a sense of accountability among archaeologists:

> The interests served by an unreflective archaeology are of those in power who seek to tighten control of the dispossessed through history and archaeology …In the United States, this translates to the support and legitimization of a social order permeated by racism, classism, and gender bias (Franklin 1997:38).

Trouillot (1991:17) calls for a self-reflective “archaeology” of anthropology as a discipline in order to challenge these systems of domination. Such an endeavor requires recognizing that the entire discipline is situated within a larger discursive field, the foundations of which are built on global White supremacy. Beliso-de Jesús and Pierre (2019) propose a three-pronged approach to an anthropology of White supremacy. First, such an endeavor recognizes the ways in which power inequalities contribute to the construction of race and the privileging of Whiteness as normative and superior. Second, it attends to transnational and historic processes of White supremacy. Finally, it avoids focusing on racist extremist movements such as White nationalism and instead recognizes White supremacy as institutionalized and engrained in global power structures.

Other scholars have pushed towards greater community engagement in the pursuit of ethical anthropology and archaeology. The clientage model of public engagement acknowledges that researchers have responsibilities to multiple parties (Blakey 2020). They have a duty to the profession of archaeology to follow ethical guidelines and produce solid research; they have obligations to their business clients depending on the terms of their employment; and, most importantly, they have responsibilities to ethical clients and descendants (Blakey & Rankin-Hill 2009; Blakey 2020). Ethical archaeological practice at sites associated with African-American history thus requires collaboration with a self-identified “descendant community” (LaRoche & Blakey 1997). Identification as a descendant does not require direct ancestral connection. Rather, it depends on personal feelings of connection and a sense of shared history:

> Importantly, the descendant community is defined by those asserting stewardship because they care about the disposition of ancestors in question, thus making them vulnerable to harm by anthropological treatment. They therefore are subject to and empowered by professional ethics (an ethical client) with rights to some version of informed consent over the disposition of their ancestral remains and arguably even over the interpretation of their histories. (Blakey 2020)

Empowering descendant communities is a key component of decolonizing archaeology. This includes engaging descendants in every stage of the research process, from developing a research design to deciding how the results of a study will be presented and interpreted. This practice has broader implications than simply being respectful. When marginalized voices are brought to the front, the public is forced to confront aspects of dominant historical narratives.

Recognizing the impact and influence of global White supremacy allows the field of anthropology to address the results of its past practice. At a site like the First Baptist Church, archaeology cannot truly be a restorative act without first reckoning with the legacy of violence and erasure imposed by the museum. What is more, open acknowledgement of the systemic nature of White supremacy opens new avenues of analysis that would otherwise be overlooked. The analysis presented in the following chapters build on this conceptual background in order to develop an informed perspective on the history of Colonial Williamsburg and the First Baptist site.

Making History at Colonial Williamsburg

Historical production is the result of uneven power relationships and complex networks of silence and emphasis (Trouillot 2015 [1995]). Elements of the past may be hidden from historic narratives via two tropes: erasure, when facts are excluded from discourse, and banalization, when events are trivialized or removed from their context. The resulting “layers” of silence create an illusion in which subaltern voices have no place and the powerful have dominion over less-privileged bodies and over the past itself. This phenomenon is not accidental:

> Thus the presences and absences embodied in sources (artifacts and bodies that turn an event into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds and degrees. By silence, I mean an active and transitive process: one “silences” a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing. (Trouillot 2015 [1995]: 48).

White supremacy is one power structure that governs processes of historical production. That system is manifested by the ways in which historical information is incorporated and deployed either to exclude stories of racism from discussion or to decontextualize and excuse White violence. Museum spaces complicate the ways in which historical narratives are created. By positioning tangible artifacts as direct links to the historic events, museum exhibits claim greater access to an objective, true past.

Museums developed as means of entertainment for White society (Willis 1969). They were not intended to be purely educational institutions, and they were not meant to make non-White individuals comfortable. In this way, museums and similar institutions may constitute a “White public space,” or a setting in which systems of White privilege function to keep non-White people in inferior positions (Page & Thomas 1994). Reid (2019) reframes this concept for museum landscapes in her study of the “rehistoricization” of Jamestown. She describes Jamestown as “White public heritage space” in which the landscape and historic narrative “materializes and reproduces racial hierarchy and privilege to promote white solidarity and white supremacy” (Reid 2019:32).

Ryzewski (2021) has also demonstrated the ways in which stories of Black perseverance can be restricted and controlled through the built landscape. Ryzewski evaluates the ways in which public landscapes embody and communicate (White) city officials’ fear and desire for control over Black communities. Her analysis of Gordon Park in Detroit, Michigan, the site of a massive uprising (or “race riot”) in 1967, shows that the park landscape was designed as a form of social control to prevent the Black community from gathering and to restrict movement and crowd formation within the park boundaries. Ryzewski also documents the ways in which the local Black community repurposed and modified aspects of the built landscape to suit their own needs. In 2017, Gordon Park was renovated as a commemorative space with signage used to reconnect the site to its Civil Rights history. The new park was designed with little community consultation, and many aspects of the community's personality were stripped away during the renovation, but the community continues to make the space its own.

Similar processes of control and erasure were at work during the creation of Colonial Williamsburg. As with any case of historical production, the Restoration was accomplished according to specific goals. Today Colonial Williamsburg is a social history museum, but it was originally created as a "national historic shrine, commemorating for all time those fundamental qualities and human personalities upon which our nation was founded" (John D. Rockefeller, quoted in Wertenbaker 1950:231). This nationalistic, moralizing approach to historic preservation is not unique to Williamsburg (Lindgren 1989,1993; Greenspan 2002; Horning 2006). Lindgren (1989, 1993) argues that the basis of historic preservation in Virginia is a return to "traditionalism." By turning to the past, preservationists hoped to resurrect old moral values and reverse the degeneration of a society that had become "materialistic, and greedy, and full of lust and ambition" (W.A.R. Goodwin, quoted in Lindgren 1993:57).

This emphasis on heritage was also intrinsically linked to narratives of the Lost Cause (Lindgren 1989, 1993). The preservation of historic structures in Williamsburg and other Virginia towns was an assertion of the South's role in creating the nation as well as a reaffirmation of Old South values. The APVA, for example, worked closely with Confederate heritage organizations (Lindgren 1989, 1993). There was significant overlap in the movements' leaders and missions; both were responses to perceived threats from African Americans, Northerners, and progressives.

These threats were met with vehement assertions of the glorious history of Virginia. Early histories of Williamsburg's Restoration emphasize the connections between Williamsburg places and prominent (White, male) historic figures such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, George Mason, Patrick Henry, and a long list of colonial governors (Wertenbaker 1950; Wertenbaker 1953). The artifacts and buildings of the Restoration were made to embody the ideals associated with these men and with nationalistic myths of America's birth:

> Brick and trees and flowers are of interest chiefly because of the men with whom they were associated and whose ideals, hopes, culture, and life they reflect. The builders of this nation have handed down to succeeding generations a rich heritage, a heritage of self-government, of self-reliance, of human dignity, of human rights. It is of the greatest importance that Americans today should have a sense of gratitude to the founders for this priceless legacy and a firm determination to preserve it" (Wertenbaker 1950:231).

By idealizing “the glorious days which won American liberty and created the nation” (Wertenbaker 1950:232), the Restoration built traditionalist values into the museum itself (Lindgren 1989). As I will show at the First Baptist site, White supremacy was also built into the physical landscape of the museum. But a discussion of First Baptist specifically first requires a contextual background of museums and the Restoration of Colonial Williamsburg.

Museums serve a complex variety of social roles (Gray & McCall 2020). They display history, but they also write it. They educate the public, but they also entertain. They preserve elements of the past, but they also deploy those artifacts in the present to prioritize specific narratives. They are in many cases meant to provide a public service, but they must also make money to perpetuate their own existence. With all of these dynamic, competing interests, the museum becomes a site of conflict structured by power differentials and political agendas. These conflicts are negotiated on multiple levels, from executive decisions concerning large-scale policy to daily, face-to-face interactions between museum employees and guests (Gray & McCall 2020; Handler & Gable 1997; Gable & Handler 1993).

The main interpretive focus of Colonial Williamsburg is the late 18th century. Narratives of this time period, informed by historic, architectural, and archaeological evidence, are presented to guests formally in museum exhibits and scripted programs and tours. However, history is also transmitted through informal interactions with living history interpreters, archaeologists, and other frontline employees and volunteers. These informal instances of transmission are more likely to be colored by specific employees' personal beliefs and interests, whereas the formal programs have been approved by higher-ups at the institution (Handler & Gable 1997).

The setting of nearly all Colonial Williamsburg interpretation is the Historic Area centered on the mile-long Duke of Gloucester Street. The official Restoration of the Historic Area began in the 1920s, when the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin and John D. Rockefeller embarked on a mission to preserve historic structures and the ostensibly grand history of America's founding. This work followed on preservation efforts begun in the late 19th century by local women's groups and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities. Those early efforts focused on preserving a few specific sites, including the Magazine, Bruton Parish Church, and the ruins of the Capitol building (Lindgren 1993).

In the decades after Goodwin and Rockefeller took on the project, 19th- and 20th-century buildings across the current Historic Area were demolished and the modern world was effectively erased from the physical landscape to make room for an idealized representation of a colonial town. Extant historic structures were stripped of more recent architectural elements and restored to a more colonial appearance. Other historic-appearing buildings were (re)constructed on brick foundations uncovered during archaeological investigations. These changes also marked significant changes in the social landscape of the town.

At the beginning of the Restoration, the area that is now Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area was an integrated neighborhood (Rowe 2000). Jim Crow was in effect, and most businesses and facilities were socially segregated, but they were in close physical proximity (Bogger 2006; Greenspan 2002). The Restoration effort was met with suspicion by Black residents, and for good reason. Black landowners received less money for their properties than their white neighbors, and they were not allowed into the meetings in which the town's takeover were discussed. Many residents who did not want to sell were forced out; in one case, workers dug a "huge hole" around one Black family's house, impeding them when coming and going from the property until they finally submitted and sold the land (Ellis 2000).

During the Restoration, displaced residents were relocated into racially segregated neighborhoods (Ellis 2000; Rowe 2000). Black businesses were likewise displaced, and many newly unemployed workers took jobs with Colonial Williamsburg. They were put to work excavating the sites of their homes and businesses or employed as guides and maids. Colonial Williamsburg's displacement of Black families, businesses, and churches occurred at the same time as other nearby Black communities were displaced by the US government to construct numerous military bases. In his history of the Williamsburg African-American community, Rex M. Ellis quotes lifetime Williamsburg resident Doris Crump:

> If whites wanted anything the blacks could not fight back…Blacks could not fight back, they didn’t have the resources back then. The lawyers were white, the judges were white. How much money did a lawyer stand to make defending the black community over the U.S. Government, or Colonial Williamsburg, or the State of Virginia? (Ellis 2000:232).

While Black guests were not explicitly barred from Colonial Williamsburg, they were not encouraged to visit or provided the same hospitality shown to White guests (Ellis 2000; Rowe 2000). Colonial Williamsburg facilities were nominally integrated, but most hotels and restaurants in the area were not. A local family, the Bakers, established a lodging house for Black families, but Black guests of Colonial Williamsburg (and Black chauffeurs of white guests) often had difficulty finding food or accommodation during their trip (Ellis 2000).

The displacement of Black communities during the Restoration is situated within larger patterns of discrimination and systemic racism. W.E.B. DuBois described some of the challenges faced by Black Americans at the turn of the 20th century in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1992 [1899]), including difficulties gaining and keeping employment, systemic financial disadvantages, and educational and social discrimination. All of these processes were at work during the establishment of Colonial Williamsburg. The Restoration destroyed the Black business district, which Reverend Goodwin described as “dilapidated” and “unsightly” (1930:519). Black families were relocated farther out of town, making it more difficult for them to get to work. When they were employed by the Foundation, they were given lower-level jobs and were regularly fired or demoted in favor of white applicants (Rowe 2000). Finally, the exclusion of Black people from the new Historic Area compounded forces of social discrimination and reinforced divisions between white and Black society in the town as a whole.

The Restoration of the Historic Area was a process of historical production. Colonial Williamsburg, the world’s largest living history museum, is over a mile long and covers 301 acres of land. The overall landscape is integral to the visitor experience and to the ways in which historic knowledge is communicated at the museum. The fact that there are 88 original buildings[3] in the Historic Area is drilled into employees during training, and it is often repeated to guests. From the beginning of the Restoration, the built environment of the Historic Area was treated holistically (Wertenbaker 1950). A large part of Colonial Williamsburg’s claim to authenticity rests upon the presence of surviving and reconstructed colonial structures within an overall landscape of gardens, pathways, trees, and pastures.

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[3] Or 89, since the relocation of the Bray School in February 2023.

The landscape of the Historic Area is the product of layered mentions and silences (Trouillot 2015 [1995]). The mentions – buildings and gardens that were restored or reconstructed – are what shape the embodied experience of visitors to Colonial Williamsburg today. The silences are harder to see. Parts of the museum's "invisible landscape" (Handler & Gable 1997) are still present but hidden from immediate view, as with pieces of infrastructure disguised as historic structures. Others have been completely and intentionally removed. Modern buildings, including the Black business district, were razed.

As the museum formed, historic reconstructions were brought to life with idealized visions of the colonial era. Unpleasant elements of the past are nowhere to be found. There are no muddy ravines crossing the street, no scatters of smelling trash. Interpreters do not use chamber pots and empty them in the pristine gardens. The environment is meant to be peaceful and welcoming to (White) guests. Just as the Black community was removed from the Historic Area, so too were stories of Black history.

The absence of those stories reflects several interacting values of the museum. The most overt is the temporal focus of Colonial Williamsburg, which for the most part is dedicated to the late 18th century. However, other factors were also at play, including systemic White supremacy. Lifelong First Baptist Church member Dennis Gardner attributes Colonial Williamsburg's reluctance to commemorate the Nassau Street Church to prejudice in addition to the building's 19th-century construction: "They weren't telling 19th-century history, but it was still a lack of interest, because we were there in the 1700s."[4] Instead, racism and the focus on White audiences influenced the decisions on what stories to tell. Colonial Williamsburg "was not interested, really, in trying to tell the story of the African Americans who lived in the Williamsburg area."[5]

Jacquelyn Gardner, Dennis's wife and First Baptist member since 1972, agreed with Mr. Gardner's sentiment and added, "Well there's a reason for that. And the reason is because if you are the center of the Confederacy, you don't want to tell those stories. You have to remember, Williamsburg was the center of the Confederacy." To this, Mr. Gardner replied, "And that's not an excuse."

This topic arose again later in our conversation, as Mrs. Gardner discussed the displacement of the Black community and the development of historical narratives during the Restoration. She emphasized that "when they did the Restoration, none of that [African-American] history was connected or used." Mr. Gardner jumped in: "Well, they didn't use it because they weren't telling the true history." And Mrs. Gardner replied once more, "Because it was the center of the Confederacy! You have to think about that."

Even today, when a visitor walks down Duke of Gloucester Street, they are not confronted with the "true history" of more than half of Williamsburg's colonial population. They do not see slavery. The White "nation builders" like

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[4] Interview with author, March 16, 2023.

[5] Dennis Gardner, interview with author, March 16, 2023.

Thomas Jefferson and George and Martha Washington are plucked from the past and situated in a sterilized, modern conception, unsullied by violence against the people of color they possessed and oppressed. The two Black nation builders,[6] Gowan Pamphlet and James Armistead Lafayette, who were both enslaved, exist happily alongside them in the present, treated as their equals.[7]

The history of Williamsburg's Restoration has been available to the public primarily in the form of the coffee-table book *Williamsburg Before and After: The Rebirth of Virginia's Colonial Capital* (Yetter 1988) and its revised and expanded version, *Restoring Williamsburg* (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019). Both of these books present a history of Williamsburg beginning in c.1633 and continuing through the Restoration era. They also provide a series of photographs showing specific Williamsburg buildings before and after the Restoration.

Williamsburg Before and After follows earlier histories of the Restoration in its triumphant tone. There is no mention of race or the experience of Black Williamsburg residents in the 20th century, let alone the story of (re)segregation and displacement during the Restoration. Instead, *Williamsburg Before and After* presents a nostalgic narrative in which a few heroes halted a small town's decline into modernity and revived "the slow-paced days of an earlier era when life somehow seemed simpler" (Yetter 1988:10). Even in this late 20th-century book, the historic character of Williamsburg is explicitly tied to moral values. Modern structures, built "of the poorest materials and lacking architectural character," are described as a sign of moral decline and a blight on "their genteel old neighbors" (Yetter 1988:7). Yetter laments the loss of "ordered beauty," pride, and dignity associated with the colonial era (1988:4,10). He also includes several stories which make it clear that both White Williamsburg residents and Restoration officials held strong ties to the Confederate past. One of the first anecdotes in the book is the reminiscence of a Restoration worker who, when scared by thunderstorms, would seek out the "protection" of a prominently-displayed Confederate flag (Yetter 1988:3).

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[6] There are two Black nation builders as of April 2023, but there have been others in the past, including Black women (https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/explore/nation-builders/).

[7] This is not to say that no one at Colonial Williamsburg tries to have difficult conversations. There are many interpreters, both White and people of color, who engage guests in meaningful discussions about race and slavery, and several Black interpreters do portray enslaved people on the streets or in special programming.

The revised history, *Restoring Williamsburg,* emphasizes that the story of the Restoration is more than simply *before* and *after*. Yetter and Lounsbury (2019) recognize the Restoration as an ongoing process rather than a single event and shift the narrative away from "the town that time passed by" (Yetter 1988:30) and towards a more nuanced view of the Restoration. *Restoring Williamsburg* also discusses the experience of the Black community during the Restoration. However, it maintains some of the nostalgic tone and Confederate values espoused by its predecessor, including excusing segregation and Jim Crow as acceptable based on the "social mores of the time” (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019:45). It also excuses the Restoration’s role in (re)segregating the town; this will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

The violence of White supremacy is woven throughout the history of the Restoration, and it persists today in narratives of the creation of the Historic Area. As a process of historical production, the Restoration inscribed values associated with Jim Crow and the Lost Cause directly into the museum landscape. Colonial Williamsburg was created for a White audience and meant to instill traditionalist values and inspire nationalistic myths of the United States’ beginning. These values remain the foundation of the museum, but the ongoing process of Restoration continually reshapes the Historic Area to reflect changing values and emphasize different stories.

Neither Black bodies or voices were ever absent from the Historic Area, even if they were rendered invisible by histories of the Restoration. Many displaced residents took up jobs as maids, tour guides, and even archaeologists in the museum. In addition to their physical presence in the landscape, these individuals had a significant impact on guests to the Historic Area. Edwards-Ingram (2014) highlights the role of African-American coachmen in shaping both the visitor experience and the overall perception of Colonial Williamsburg in the decades before intensive interpretation of the African-American experience began. This influence was enacted through interpersonal interactions with guests, including royalty and dignitaries, and in the ways in which these coachmen and other Black employees interpreted the town’s history through their own personal perspectives (Edwards-Ingram 2014; Handler & Gable 1997). This presence was also highly visible on a wider scale, as Black coachmen were prominently featured in advertisements, postcards, and other visual media developed for nation-wide consumption; thus, their presence became an integral part of the Colonial Williamsburg experience (Edwards-Ingram 2014). However, these coachmen and other employees were still “serving people who wouldn’t even let them into the buildings,” as former interpreter, First Baptist descendant, and current church member Johnette Weaver put it.[8] And as time went on, Black coachmen were replaced with White employees (Edwards-Ingram 2014). Their labor and expertise were devalued as Colonial Williamsburg claimed they were unqualified due to their lack of a college degree[9] – never mind that many of these coachmen had been giving tours for years.

Intensive interpretation of the experience of Black individuals in colonial times began in 1979 (Matthews 1999; Gable et al 1992; Edwards-Ingram 2014). The initiative to tell the stories of free and enslaved Black Williamsburg residents was part of a larger shift in the museum’s educational practice. 1979 marked the beginning of Colonial Williamsburg as it exists today, with a greater emphasis on social history, everyday people, and lived experience (Matthews 1999). The shift away from a focus on elite individuals included many changes in interpretation, including the first efforts to officially address the role of slavery in the colonial period. To that end, Colonial Williamsburg administrators recruited Dr. Rex Ellis to develop first-person interpretation of enslaved individuals and to recruit more Black interpreters.

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[8] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.

[9] Johnette Weaver, interview with author, April 10, 2023.

Under Dr. Ellis's leadership, the Department of African American Interpretations and Presentations (AAIP) formed in the 1980s (Matthews 1999). The AAIP developed tours and other programs to introduce guests to stories of Black lives in the colonial period; however, the separation between "mainstream" (primarily White) interpretation and AAIP as a special division did not remedy the phenomenon of segregated history. With Black history treated as a special case, spaces occupied and utilized by Black individuals continued to commemorate only White individuals (Edwards 2021; Edwards-Ingram 2019). Some White interpreters also used the AAIP's existence as an excuse to avoid talking about slavery in their own positions, while some Black interpreters accused White staff of hiding the "real story" from guests (Matthews 1999; Handler & Gable 1997). This, of course, was not ideal, and the structural division was short-lived. AAIP was officially dissolved in 1997, although it persisted in some form until 2016 at a few sites with more intensive African-American interpretive programming.[10]

The most controversial AAIP program occurred in 1994, when the Black interpretive staff reenacted a slave auction at Wetherburn's Tavern on Duke of

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[10] Meredith Poole, personal communication, April 6, 2023.

Gloucester Street (Devlin 2003; Matthews 1999).[11] Christy Coleman, director of the AAIP, proposed the program and received unanimous support from the African-American interpretive staff (Devil 2003). Four interpreters, including Coleman, volunteered to portray enslaved people during the sale. The planned auction was met with justified concern from local and national audiences, including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). As Coleman met personally with local NAACP chapters and other concerned parties, their concerns were largely assuaged; however, national media coverage fueled outrage from more distant groups (Coleman 1997; Coleman 1999; Devlin 2003).

On October 10, 1994, the auction program was attended by over 2,000 spectators, reporters, and protesters (Devlin 2003). The event was met with a wide range of responses, with some people calling it too horrific and others saying it was not horrific enough, while others praised it as an emotional and impactful display (Devlin 2003). The auction had a significant psychological impact on both Black and White interpreters who participated in the program, and it has never been repeated.

Today, a rotating selection of programs introduce Colonial Williamsburg guests to African-American history.[12] The ultimate goal of incorporating multivocal interpretation would be “complete inclusion,” or interpretation of the African-American experience every day, at every single site within the museum (Matthews 1997; Edwards 2021). This goal has by no means been met, but the dissolution of the AAIP signals a move towards more integrated historical interpretation throughout museum programming.[13] Of course, interpretation is just one piece of the larger museum’s activities. As a research institution, Colonial Williamsburg produces knowledge through archaeological, documentary, and architectural investigations in addition to sharing information with the public. As part of the larger museum, the Department of Archaeology conforms to the museum’s overall values, and as those values shift, so too do archaeological practices (Poole & Samford 2021).

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[11] For a comprehensive discussion of the auction program, controversy, and response, see Devlin (2003).

[12] https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/visit/itineraries/african-american-experience/

The earliest values of the museum, focusing on specific White, male individuals and stories of nationalism, were engrained within archaeological practice at Colonial Williamsburg. From the beginning of the Restoration, excavation was seen as essential to cultivating an authentic historic landscape, but the first excavations focused on sites associated with elite men, like the Governor’s Palace and Capital (Poole & Samford 2021). Archaeologist James M. Knight arrived at the museum in 1931 and developed a technique of “cross-trenching” to locate brick foundations across large areas. That technique served as the primary mode of archaeological excavation in Williamsburg for the next thirty years. During this time, the main focus remained on gathering architectural information, and artifacts were not systematically collected during excavation. The physical work of excavation, although most often credited to Knight himself, was conducted primarily by crews of Black "laborers" and "foundation diggers" (Poole 2021).[14]

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[13] Jack Gary and Meredith Poole, interview with author, March 15, 2023.

Ivor Noël Hume, Colonial Williamsburg's first Director of Archaeology, came to the museum in 1957 and held his position until 1982. Under his direction, archaeology in the museum shifted to focus more on material culture and especially on systematic excavation, collection, and curation practices (Poole & Samford 2021). In 1982, Dr. Marley Brown became the Director of Archaeology. This shift in leadership corresponded to the overall museum's transition to focusing on social history and more inclusive stories. Under Dr. Brown's leadership, archaeological research diversified to a wider range of anthropological research questions, and the history of slavery was a main research priority (Poole & Samford 2021). During this period, several African-American archaeologists also joined the department, bringing with them more diverse research questions, priorities, and perspectives.

Dr. Brown's leadership ended in 2008, but the department continued to pursue questions of social history and initiated several projects in collaboration with Native American and African-American descendant groups (Poole & Samford 2021). The 2011-2012 excavation at the Brafferton Indian School on William & Mary's campus was the first large-scale archaeological investigation of Native American life in 18th-century Williamsburg (Kostro 2021). This project was conducted in collaboration with the Brafferton Legacy Group, composed of Native American alumni of William & Mary, who guided the research process and assisted with developing interpretive materials after the excavation (Kostro 2021; Poole & Samford 2021). Excavations at the Bray School, carried out between 2012 and 2014 and in 2022, have revealed compelling information about the education of both enslaved and free Black children in the mid-18th century. The Bray School Initiative, a partnership between Colonial Williamsburg and William & Mary, integrates archaeology, architectural history, documentary research, historic interpretation, education, and descendant engagement.[15]

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[14] Also see Chapter 5.

Archaeologists at Colonial Williamsburg have also collaborated directly with the First Baptist Church on previous projects. In 2003, excavations associated with a construction project encountered two tombstones buried beneath a parking lot in Merchant’s Square. The tombstones belonged to Robert F. Hill and his daughter Lucy Ann Dunlop, two wealthy, free Black residents of Williamsburg in the mid-19th century (Williams 2020). The stones had been relocated from their original location in c.1925 during construction of a White Methodist church and had been encountered by earlier archaeologists during the parking lot’s installation in 1965 (Williams 2020). At that time, the tombstones were photographed and then left in place as the parking lot was installed. When they were rediscovered in 2003, they were fully excavated and a long-term plan for their conservation and display was developed with members of the First Baptist Church (Williams 2020). Descendants of Lucy Dunlop and her husband Alexander attend the First Baptist Church today, and Lucy and Robert may have been associated with the church in their own time.

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[15] https://www.wm.edu/sites/brayschool/bray-initiative

The conservation of the tombstones took twelve years to complete. During that time, in accordance with the wishes of the First Baptist congregation, the stones were featured in tours and other programs and included in museum exhibits (Williams 2020). They became teaching tools and connections to the history of Williamsburg's Black community. Concurrently with the tombstones' conservation, Colonial Williamsburg also partnered with the First Baptist Church to repair and conserve a brass bell from the Nassau Street church. The bell was originally purchased by a in 1886 by a group of women in the First Baptist congregation (Bogger 2006; Williams 2020). It was moved to the Scotland Street church in 1956 but became structurally unsound soon after. It remained unusable until 2015, when Colonial Williamsburg conservators worked with the First Baptish church to repair and restored the bell.

The tombstones were installed and dedicated in the church on January 31, 2016. Beginning the next day, February 1, 2016, the "Freedom Bell" was rung every day for a month, commemorating Black History Month and the congregation's 240th anniversary (Williams 2020). In September 2016, the bell was briefly removed from the church and transported to Washington, D.C., where it was rung by President Barack Obama at the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). After the opening of the NMAAHC, the bell returned to the church on Scotland Street, where it remains today.

These projects represent the beginnings of collaborative archaeological research at Colonial Williamsburg, in which power over the production of knowledge is shared with self-defined descendant groups. The remaining chapters will discuss the First Baptist Church on Nassau Street as a case study. I begin with a history of the church, then discuss how it was affected by the Restoration and the ways in which the values of the museum were embodied in the landscape. Finally, in Chapter 6, I explore the ways in which the values of collaboration and multivocal research and interpretation are being enacted in the ongoing archaeological work at the First Baptist site.

History of the First Baptist Church: 1776 to Present

According to oral histories, the congregation that became the First Baptist Church was founded in 1776 by a group of free and enslaved African Americans. The group met first at Green Springs Plantation a few miles from the city of Williamsburg and then at Raccoon Chase, a wooded area just outside the town (Bogger 2006; Rowe 2021). The congregation was led by two enslaved men. First was a minister known today only as Moses, and the second was Gowan Pamphlet. Little is known today about Moses other than his role as a preacher. Baptist historian Robert Semple, a contemporary of Moses and Gowan Pamphlet, wrote that Moses "was often taken up and whipped for holding meetings" (1810).

Gowan Pamphlet's birthdate is unknown. He was ordained as a Baptist pastor in 1772 but had likely been preaching for a while before that. Semple writes that "Gowan, who called himself Gowan Pamphlet," came to Williamsburg from Middlesex, "where he had been preaching for some time" (1810:114). This phrasing suggests that Gowan chose his own surname. Colonial Williamsburg interpreter James Ingram, who has researched and portrayed Gowan for several decades, believes that Pamphlet admired Thomas Paine's dedication to abolitionism and religious freedom and named himself after the pamphlet "Common Sense."[16] Pamphlet was in Williamsburg by 1779, when a *Virginia Gazette* advertisement accused "a negro fellow named Gov[n] belonging to Mrs. Vobe of Williamsburg" of stealing a horse (quoted in Rowe 2021). While in Williamsburg, Pamphlet worked in the King's Arms Tavern, which was owned by his enslaver Jane Vobe, in addition to serving as a minister.

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[16] Interview by the author, March 21, 2023.

According to Bogger (2006), Pamphlet attended the Dover Baptist Association's annual meeting in 1781, despite that association forbidding Black individuals from preaching, and continued to serve as a minister despite sanction. Pamphlet left Williamsburg in 1785, when Vobe moved her household to Chesterfield County (Rowe 2021). After Vobe's death, Pamphlet was enslaved by her son David Miller who moved his household back to Williamsburg in 1791. At that time, he resumed his role as the minister for the congregation, known at that time as the African Baptist Church, and continued in that position after he was manumitted in 1793.

The African Baptist Church requested admittance to the Dover Baptist Association in 1791, immediately after Pamphlet's return, and was formally admitted two years later (Hillman 2005; Semple 1810). It was the first all-Black congregation to be admitted (Hillman 2005). In the early 19th century, Jesse Cole[17] a White Williamsburg resident, heard the African Baptist congregation singing at Raccoon Chase and was so moved that he offered them a plot of land to construct a permanent church building in the city (Bogger 2006; Colonial Williamsburg 2020a). Cole gave the congregation use of a parcel near the corner of Nassau and Francis Streets, although he maintained ownership of the land (Stephenson 1959). The exact date of the church's relocation is unknown, but Gowan Pamphlet was taxed on an eighth of an acre of land within Williamsburg beginning in 1805 (Rowe 2021). In 1805, Williamsburg officials noted that "On Sundays & Holidays the number of Free negroes & Mulattoes as well as slaves that is seen in the City is truly astonishing," indicating that the church and its 500 members had relocated to Williamsburg proper by that time (quoted in Rowe 2021). Gowan Pamphlet died in 1807, not long thereafter.

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[17] Some histories, including Bogger (2006), say that it was Robert Cole.

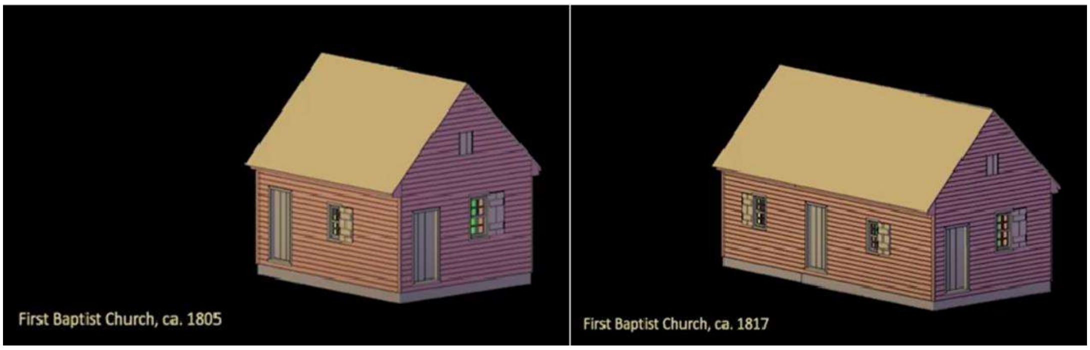
First Baptist Church, ca. 1805
First Baptist Church, ca. 1817

Figure 1: Architectural renderings showing the two-stage construction of the original Nassau Street church. Image from Colonial Williamsburg (2022).

Archaeological analysis has shown that the church on Nassau Street was built in two stages (Figure 1). Soon after moving to the lot, the congregation constructed a small meeting house, about 16 by 20 feet, fronting Nassau Street (Colonial Williamsburg 2022). By c.1818, an addition was added to the west end of the meeting house, nearly doubling its size to 16 by 32 feet. An 1817 one-cent coin was recovered beneath a brick pathway leading from Nassau Street to a door on the building's south elevation, providing support for the construction date (Colonial Williamsburg 2021). The first specific mention of the physical church on Nassau Street also dates to 1818, when the “Baptist Meeting House” was referenced in a tax book (Colonial Williamsburg 2020a). The church population peaked at around 700 members in 1824. At that time, the African Baptist Church was the largest congregation registered with the Dover Association, and it remained one of the largest for the rest of its tenure within that organization (Hillman 2005).

The 1830s held many obstacles for the congregation. Following Nat Turner’s 1831 insurrection, Black religious meetings were seen by White citizens as hotbeds of rebellion and threats to the system of White control. Virginia law forbade Black congregations to meet without the supervision of a White pastor, and Black people were forbidden from preaching altogether (Hillman 2005; Bogger 2006). The meeting house on Nassau Street closed temporarily in 1832, but the congregation continued to assert its own existence. The Dover Association continued to record the Williamsburg church as an active, autonomous congregation, and three delegates from the church attended the Dover annual meeting the same year the church was ostensibly closed.

Williamsburg officials still forbade the church to be led by a Black minister and additionally ordered them to expel “suspicious persons” from their ranks (Lewes & Hanbury 2017:14). It is possible that the authorities intended the church to banish potential revolutionaries; minutes from the Dover

Association’s 1832 meeting record that the African Baptist Church was “determined to keep none in fellowship who do not honor Christ, and walk as Christians; and hence many have been excluded from their body” (quoted in Hillman 2005:29). In that year, church membership dropped from about 700 to 400 members. This decline in numbers may reflect the expulsion of members who did not meet the imposed standards. However, it may also indicate that some enslaved members of the congregation had been forbidden to attend services by their owners (Bogger 2006).

The meeting house was reopened by October of 1832 (Bogger 2006). Unfortunately, the congregation was still required to have a White minister to oversee the church. A series of White pastors held this position between the 1830s and 1860s, but they were ministers in name only and many are not even identified in church records (Bogger 2006). The choice of ministers appointed to the church reflect White attempts to control and subjugate Black residents; William T. Lindsay, whose tenure at the First Baptist Church was short-lived, conducted church services on weekends while maintaining his primary occupation of a slave trader during the week (Bogger 2006). Lindsay and others used their position at the pulpit to deliver paternalistic sermons encouraging enslaved individuals to submit to White authority. Still, in terms of daily operations and the majority of pastoral duties, Black leadership of the church continued.

The coming years brought more trouble. In 1834, a tornado passed through the city. On June 23, 1834, the Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser reported that the tornado destroyed “the colored people’s meeting house near the Lunatic Hospital; the gable end of Mr. Jesse Cole’s brick stable and carriage house was also blown in” (quoted in Colonial Williamsburg 2020a). With their church building gone, the congregation relocated to Cole’s damaged carriage house just across the street, where they worshipped for the next twenty-two years (Colonial Williamsburg 2020a).

The church’s displacement into the “shacklety” carriage house (1933 oral history of Eliza Baker, quoted in Colonial Williamsburg 2020a) did not dissuade its members from worshipping as they pleased. They also continued to meet without the oversight of a White minister despite legal requirements. On December 21, 1854, the Virginia Gazette reported that despite the “commendable” purpose of the church’s nightly meetings they were still a threat to the system of White control:

> [W]e doubt the propriety of allowing them to gather by themselves every night and continuing their meeting until a very late hour. What such assemblies may lead to we do not pretend to say, but we know that it has lead [sic] to evil in times past and may do so again. We hope the City Authorities will speedily put an end to or at least see that it is carried on under the inspection of proper white persons. Our City Police too should be on the lookout! (quoted in Bogger 2006:18)

In the early 1850s, the congregation began raising money to construct a new church building. They appointed three White men, including minister and slave trader William Lindsay, as a building committee to negotiate contracts for the building’s construction (Bogger 2006). This was a form of legal protection in case the contractors failed to uphold their contract; a Black committee would have been unable to take White contractors to court. However, Black church members maintained financial control of the process as well as oversight of the committee.

Funds for the new church were garnered from the wider Williamsburg area as well as other nearby counties, reflecting the wide impact of the church. White residents provided donations to the building fund and attended the 1856 dedication of the brick church (Bogger 2006) (Figure 2). The dedication was segregated, with White guests given the best seats while Black church members sat in the balcony. So many people attended that the church was not large enough to hold the crowd, and both Black and White attendees stood outside the church during the ceremony.

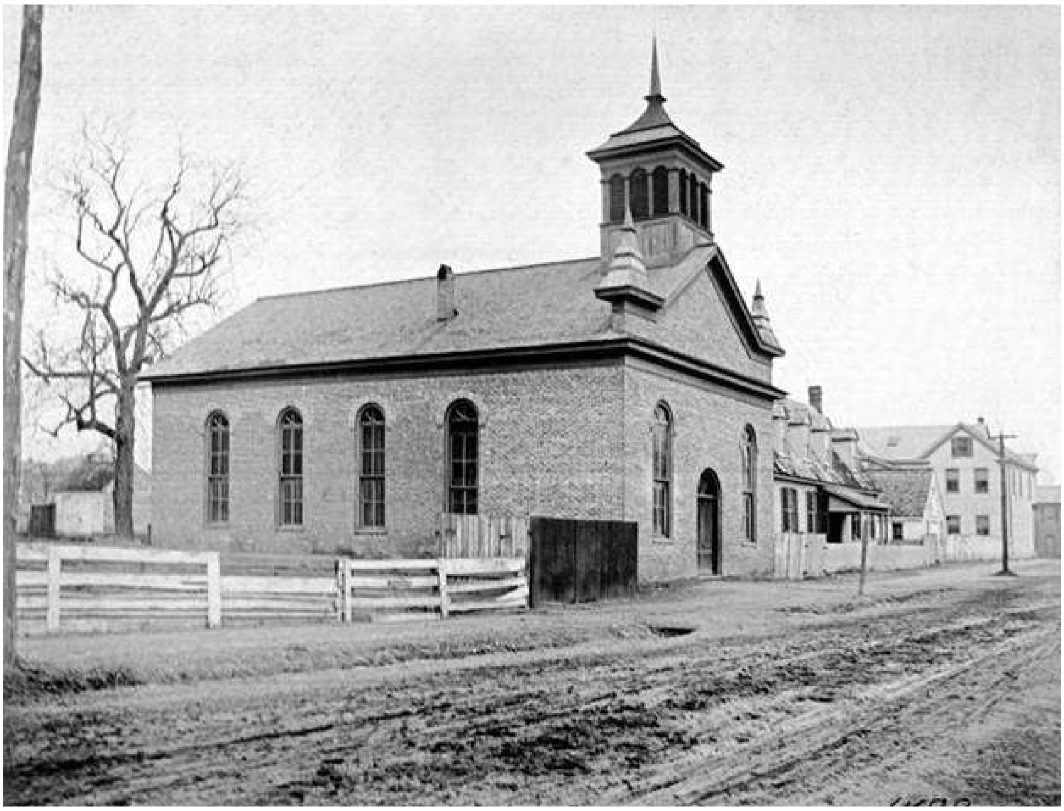

Figure 2: The second church on the Nassau Street site, constructed 1856 and photographed c.1900. Image from Colonial Williamsburg Special Collections, Rockefeller Library.

Williamsburg was the site of several military campaigns during the Civil War. During the Confederate occupation of the town, the church was seized by the Confederate army and used as a hospital, and the congregation was unable to meet in its building for nearly a year (Bogger 2006). The city was captured by Union forces in 1862, after which many of the restrictive laws against Black churches were lifted (Lewes & Hanbury 2017). In 1863, the African Baptist Church changed its name to the First Baptist Church of Williamsburg. That same year, it joined other African-American Baptist churches in the region to break away from the Dover Association and form the Norfolk Virginia Union Baptist Association (Bogger 2006; Lewes & Hanbury

2017). During the war, a Quaker-run school operated out of the church (Lewes & Hanbury 2017). After the war, the church housed both a school operated by the Freedman's Bureau and a theological school to train African-American Baptist ministers. Graduates of the theological school would go on to become ministers serving churches across the state and nation (Bogger 2006).

Upon Jesse Cole's death in 1869, the church lot passed to his son Robert Cole (Stephenson 1959). Robert Cole's heirs transferred ownership of the property to the First Baptist church after his death in 1887. Church membership continued to grow, and a small, semi-octagonal apse addition was added to the building's west end in 1893 (Bogger 2006). In 1953, the congregation broke ground on an annex just west of the church building. At that time, congregant Fanny Epps voiced concern regarding the presence of burials in the western portion of the church lot. Sister Epps informed church authorities that her great-grandfather was interred beneath the proposed annex location (Bogger 2006; Colonial Williamsburg 2020a). The church ultimately decided to continue with the annex's construction despite the possible presence of burials.

When the church broke ground on the annex in 1953, they had been under pressure to relocate for years. Most churches in the Historic Area were relocated in the 1930s; Colonial Williamsburg paid for the construction of some new churches off-site as a last-ditch effort to entice congregations to move or as a result of legal action (Ellis 2000). In 1949, Colonial Williamsburg offered to construct a new church to consolidate all three of the Black churches remaining in the Historic Area (Bogger 2006). That offer was refused.

First Baptist remained in its original location for three decades after the Restoration began (Figure 3). They planned to remain on that site for much longer, as evidenced by plans to construct the annex behind the church. Only two weeks after the groundbreaking, Colonial Williamsburg made another offer in exchange for the church property: a half-acre parcel of land less than a mile away from the original location and $130,000 to construct a new church (Bogger 2006; Lewes & Hanbury 2017). There were many benefits to relocating, including constructing a larger church with indoor plumbing and acquiring space for a parking lot. Lifelong church member Christine Gardner Jordan, who traces her families' involvement at First Baptist Church back at least six generations, remembers the relocation being presented as a positive event, only to realize much later that other forces were also at work:

> When the church was sold, I was a high school student. My parents didn't discuss "adult matters" with the children. I remember being told that we were getting a brand new two-story church building which would include a much larger sanctuary, Sunday School classrooms, a kitchen, an a dining hall. Later, I learned that Colonial Williamsburg (The Restoration) was moving colored people (Negroes, African Americans) out of the historical district (personal communication, April 24, 2023).

With the many benefits in mind, the congregation agreed to relocate. Jacquelyn Gardner, whose grandfather was a trustee at the Nassau Street church and who joined First Baptist herself in 1972, emphasizes the move to Scotland Street as an act of perseverance and growth:

> It was a great move, to establish the sanctuary in Williamsburg. Not to *leave* Williamsburg, but to extend that church in Williamsburg and to come up to be a modern church so that we could expand our membership (interview with author, March 16, 2023).

Dennis Gardner, Jacquelyn Gardner's husband and Christine Gardner Jordan's brother, also believes that church members at the time expected their history on Nassau Street to be preserved:

> I think it was also, some of the elder members of the church, the trustees and the deacons, were forward-thinking members who thought we would get our history told about the African and African-American life in Williamsburg. And we did not. I can't say Colonial Williamsburg tricked them into it, but they did not do what a lot of the members at that time thought would happen: the redevelopment of that area like they did the rest of Colonial Williamsburg (interview with author, March 16, 2023).

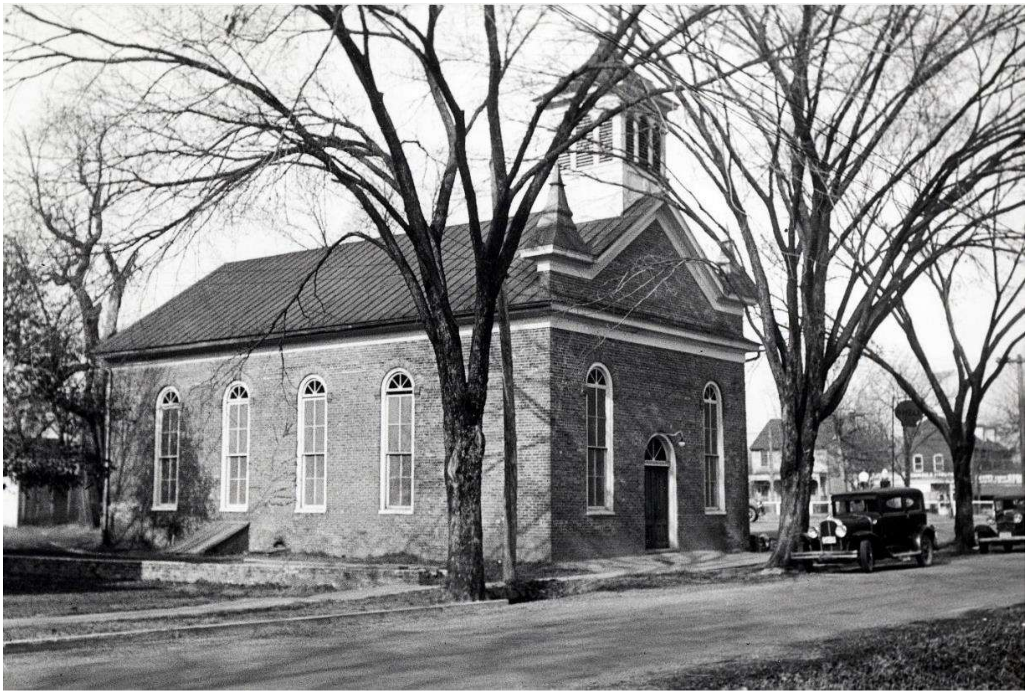

Figure 3: The 1856 church at the time of the Restoration (c.1930). Image from Colonial Williamsburg Special Collections, Rockefeller Library

Instead, Colonial Williamsburg razed the church building in 1955, a year short of the building's 100-year anniversary. The historic structure, deemed not historic enough, was unceremoniously removed from the landscape, and the Foundation immediately set about searching for buildings worthy of reconstruction. The excavation actually located the original church foundation, but the archaeologists did not recognize it as such. Instead, they interpreted the two stages of construction as two separate buildings, one measuring 16 by 20 feet and one measuring 6.5 by 12.5 feet (Colonial Williamsburg 2020a). Heavy disturbance during the construction of the 1856 church, along with limited sampling strategies, may account for the discrepancy in the size of the second foundation. Despite identifying these 18th-century foundations, the architects did not see the building(s) as worthy of reconstruction. Colonial Williamsburg had the lot paved over in 1965, and it remained a parking lot until the summer of 2020. Of course, church members remembered the history of the site, and it did not go completely unacknowledged by the museum. Sometime in the 1960s,[18] a single interpretive sign was installed just south of the original church location (see Figure 9). This sign will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Meanwhile, the First Baptist Church relocated to its current position on Scotland Street and continued to grow in membership (Figure 4).[19] The Scotland Street Church is listed on the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A (association with significant events) and C (distinctive architectural value) (Lewes & Hanbury 2017). Under Criterion A, the church has been designated locally significant in the fields of religion, ethnic heritage, and social history. The National Register form references the church's educational and political activities and connections to the Civil Rights Movement. Under Criterion C, the church is considered architecturally significant as it is one of only two churches designed by architect Bernard Spigel. Ironically, Spigel's design for the Scotland Street church was heavily influenced by the architectural character of the Restoration. The "extraordinary influence" of Colonial Williamsburg affected more than just the landscape of the Historic Area as the Colonial Revival style spread throughout the city (Lewes & Hanbury 2017).

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[18] Reverend James Ingram, interview with author, March 21, 2023.

[19] I acknowledge that the history of the church between 1956 and 2020 is sparse in this chapter. For greater detail on the activity and life of the church in this period and throughout its history, see Bogger (2006).

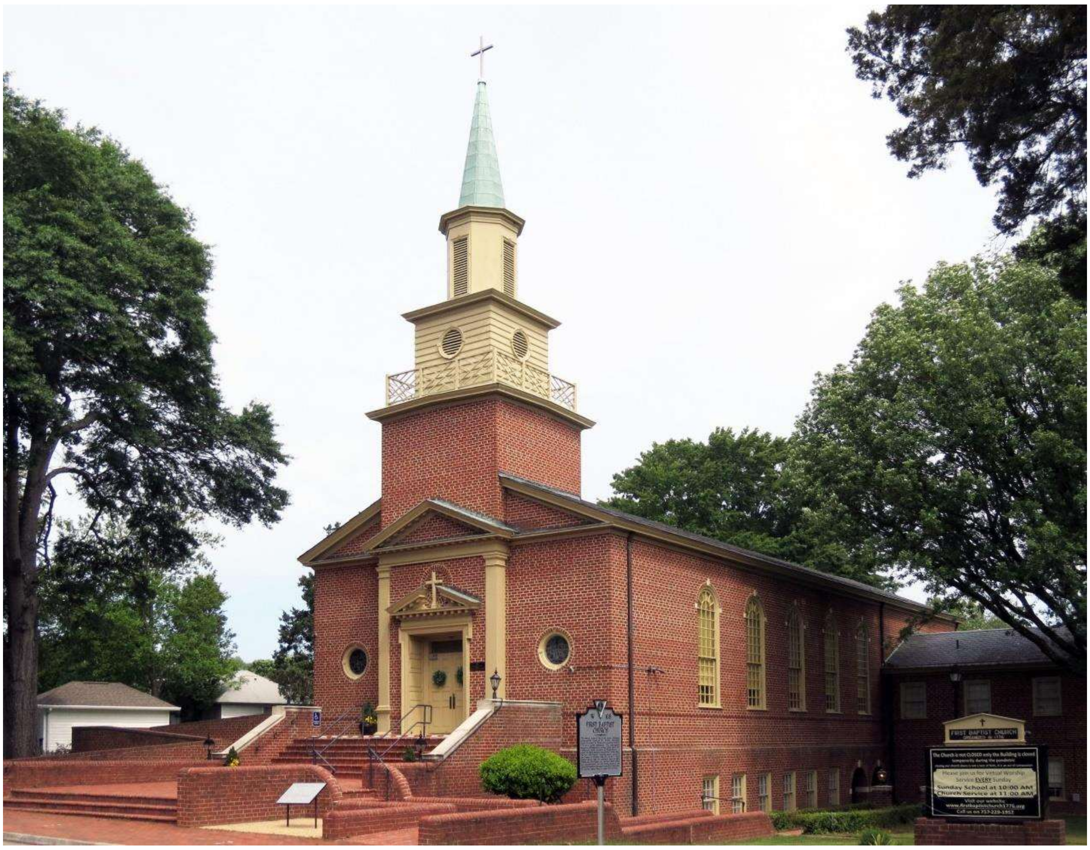

Figure 4: The Scotland Street church, constructed 1956. Photo by David Edwards, Department of Historic Resources (2021).

The First Baptist congregation was active in the Civil Rights movement, with members and leaders participating in local protests and serving as active members in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Lewes & Hanbury 2017). Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the church in 1962. It also hosted Reverend Jesse Jackson, who spoke at the church in 1990, and Rosa Parks, who visited in 1995. Concurrent with the Civil Rights movement, the church experienced "a renewed respect for black history and a yearning for the church's severed legacy" (Bogger 2006:95). To that end, they established a Church Historian position and a historical committee dedicated to preserving and recognizing the history of the church.

The First Baptist History Ministry, originally led by Ms. Marie Sheppard, is responsible for researching, preserving, and sharing the history of the church with the congregation an wider community. They share information on the church's history, including stories about the Nassau Street church, during church services and in special anniversary programs.[20] On some anniversaries, the congregation would "march back" from Scotland Street to the Nassau Street site while singing songs of praise.[21] They would then hold services in the field near the interpretive sign and at the edge of the parking lot.

In 1982, the church petitioned Colonial Williamsburg to commemorate the Nassau Street site (Bogger 2006). The church's original request was for the Foundation to reconstruct the 1856 church on its original site (Bogger 2006). However, Colonial Williamsburg was unwilling to reconstruct a 19th-century building in the Historic Area. They did suggest that they would be willing to reconstruct the first church on the site, which they believed at that time to date to c.1818. In addition to agreeing to install historic interpretation on the church site, Colonial Williamsburg promised to conduct research on the church's history and supply the church historical committee with that information.

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[20] Dennis Gardner, interview with author, March 16, 2023; Anonymous Descendant, interview with author, March 22, 2023.

[21] Dennis Gardner, interview with author, March 16, 2023; Jacquelyn Gardner, interview with author, March 16, 2023; Anonymous Descendant, interview with author, March 22, 2023; Christine Jordan, personal communication, April 24, 2023.

Archaeologists compiled two briefings exploring the site's archaeological potential (Samford 1985; Moodey & Edwards 1993). The first briefing predicts that the site will have low to moderate archaeological potential, depending on whether the site was graded during the demolition of the church building and construction of the parking lot (Samford 1995). The second cautions that due to these disturbances, "archaeological investigation is unlikely to produce evidence of a late eighteenth or early nineteenth century meeting house" (Moodey & Edwards 1993:3). However, Moodey and Edwards recommend that excavations proceed in order to "underscore the Foundation's commitment to a multi-cultural approach to historical research and interpretation" and to "strengthen [Colonial Williamsburg's] relationship with the African-American community in present day Williamsburg."

Despite this resolution, no excavation was initiated at that time. In 1997, Colonial Williamsburg proposed a design for an interpretive exhibit on African-American religion to be constructed at the Cole stable and the First Baptist site (Bogger 2006). As originally planned, the exhibit would have cost $400,000, but Colonial Williamsburg was not able to raise sufficient funds. Instead, they installed a smaller exhibit in the Cole stable after receiving a $74,000 grant from the Lilly Foundation. This exhibit, along with the interpretive sign, will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Today, the church's history is enacted in the Historic Area through first-person interpretation of Gowan Pamphlet. This character presents the perspective of a minister and enslaved individual through public programs and conversations with individual guests. Pamphlet was first portrayed by Dr. Rex Ellis soon after his arrival at Colonial Williamsburg; since 1997 he has been portrayed by Rev. James Ingram.[22] For a time, Colonial Williamsburg employed a second Gowan Pamphlet interpreter, and programs included conversations between the younger and older versions of the minister.[23] Pamphlet is counted among Colonial Williamsburg's "Nation Builders" alongside George and Martha Washington, Thomas Jefferson, the Marquis de Lafayette, and others. His biography has been extensively developed by Rev. Ingram and historian Linda Rowe, and he is a fixture in the Historic Area.

In the summer of 2020, 27 years after the original project proposal, Colonial Williamsburg initiated archaeological excavations at the site of the Nassau Street church. This project was designed as a collaboration between Colonial Williamsburg, First Baptist Church, and the church's affiliated preservation nonprofit, the Let Freedom Ring Foundation. The goal of this project was to recover enough information to reconstruct the first church building.

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[22] James Ingram, interview with author, May 21, 2023.

[23] The "Young Gowan" interpreter left due to obligations from his primary job in the military. For a while, Colonial Williamsburg's job board included a posting for this position, but that posting is not online at the time of this writing.

The research design of the 2020-2023 excavation was developed in conjunction with the community and have been continually reevaluated at community stakeholder meetings as the project has progressed.[24] Community members are considered part of the research team and are welcomed into the excavation area, which is closed to all other visitors. Colonial Williamsburg also collaborates with the church to hold religious services marking significant events. Annual Juneteenth celebrations at the site have included oration, prayer, and music from church members, and the beginning of the project and the initiation of grave excavations were marked by prayer services on site. All of this works to resituate the property as a historic site and acknowledge the connections between the museum and the present day First Baptist congregation.

The primary research objectives of the 2020-2023 excavations included identifying the location of the 1818 church, investigating the 1856 church and its destruction, and determining whether there were burials present on the site (Colonial Williamsburg 2020a). Over the course of the project, most of these goals have been met and exceeded. The location of the 1818 church has been identified, as have the two construction phases mentioned above. In addition to identifying a specific location for the original church, this provides evidence that the building was actually constructed by Black congregants. It was previously thought that the original church was a repurposed, preexisting building. This revelation emphasizes the agency of the original church members and their determination to make a place for themselves in Williamsburg.

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[24] Most if not all of the community meetings were recorded. These recordings are available at https://www.colonialwilliamsburg.org/learn/research-and-education/archaeology/first-baptist-church/

Investigations of the 1856 church have focused primarily on architectural questions, including the appearance of the church, the installation of a bulkhead cellar entrance, and the building's spatial relationship to landscape features including a large ravine. The archaeological material is still being analyzed, and exact answers to these questions are not yet known. However, some interesting details have had a resounding effect on the church community. Excavation in the western portion of the site recovered significant amounts of stained glass from contexts related to the demolition of the church and the 1957 archaeology project (Figure 5). Based on the location of these artifacts, it appears that the west elevation of the 1856 church and/or the 1893 apse addition featured stained glass windows. The fragments of colored glass are easily recognizable, closely associated with familiar religious spaces, and visually quite beautiful. They quickly became a favorite artifact for both excavators and community members who visited the site.

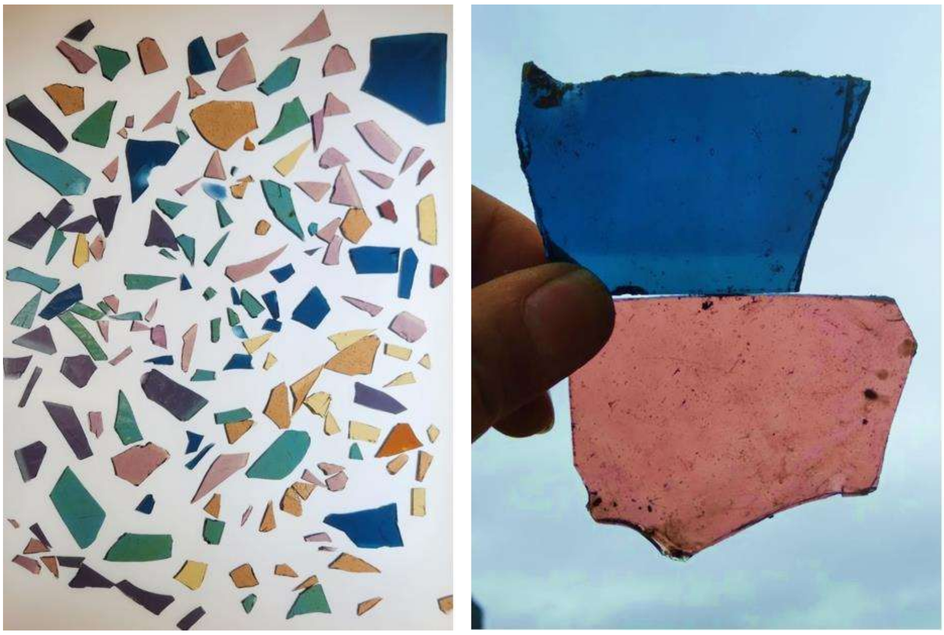

Figure 5: Stained glass fragments from the area west of the 1856 church. Photos by the author.

The most significant finding of the archaeological project has been the presence of burials (Figure 6). No burials were noted in the church's minutes or in the 1957 excavation report, although James Knight's oral history taken decades later mentioned uncovering human remains on the site. Because of this record and the 1953 testimony of Sister Epps, the archaeological crew was very concerned about the possibility of encountering burial features. Sure enough, grave shafts were identified during the preliminary stages of excavation in the fall of 2020. As of this writing in April 2023, 63 burials have been identified in the western portion of the site.

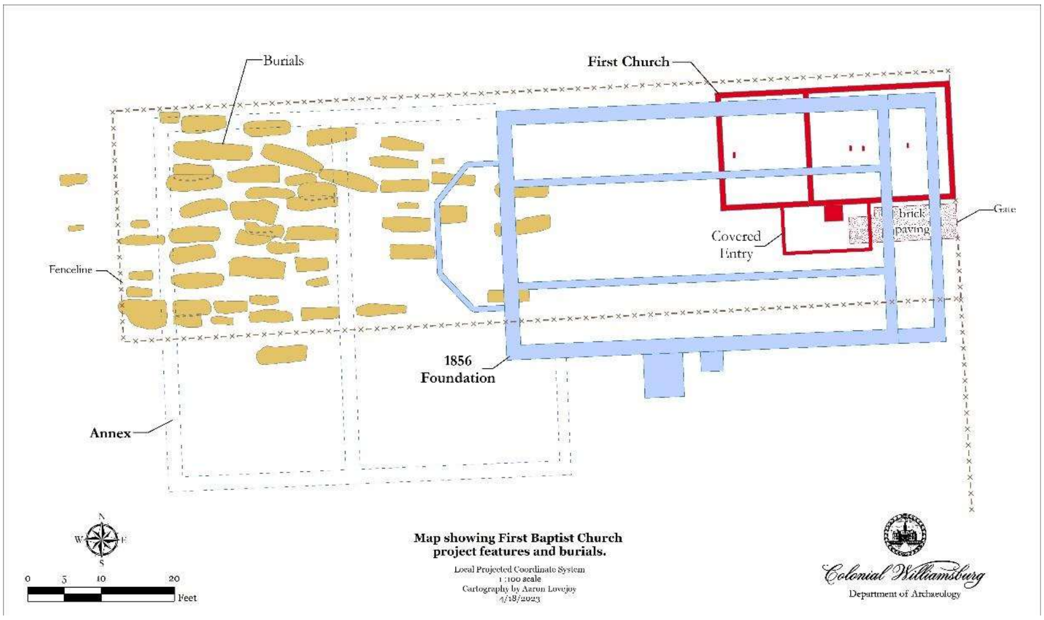
Burials
First Church
Gate
brick paving
Covered Entry
Fenceline
1856 Foundation
Annex
N
W
E
S
0
5
10
20
Feet
Map showing First Baptist Church project features and burials.
Local Projected Coordinate System
1 :100 scale
Cartography by Aaron Lovejoy
4/18/2023
Colonial Williamsburg
Department of Archaeology

Figure 6: Map showing the location of the first and second churches in relation to the cemetery. Image courtesy of Aaron Lovejoy, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

The First Baptist community partnered with the Colonial Williamsburg Archaeology Department, the Institute for Historical Biology and Lemon Project at the College of William & Mary, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, and the University of Connecticut to make decisions regarding the excavation and analysis of human remains. Representatives from these institutions participated in a series of panel discussions with the community. They each presented on their research specialization and the ways in which their analyses could provide the information the community wanted. After an extended conversation between the community and these representatives, the community voted not only on what type of research to pursue but also on whether to have burials excavated at all. Ultimately, the community decided that a sample of three graves would be excavated, that the remains would be fully disinterred for osteological analysis, and that samples of bone would be taken for genetic analysis.

The burial excavations occurred in the summer of 2021. The sampling of the remains depended on the preservation of the individual burials. The first was so poorly preserved that only a small sample, composed of teeth and a temporal bone, was taken for DNA analysis, while measurements of long bones and the cranium were taken in situ. The second individual was measured in situ, and the cranium and several long bones were removed for further study. The third individual was well-preserved such that the majority of the bones could be removed for further study. DNA samples from all three individuals were taken to the University of Connecticut for extraction and sequencing, and the human remains were transferred to the Institute for Historical Biology for osteological analysis. The results of the genetic and osteological studies were reported in April 2023, and the community will soon make decisions regarding further research, reconstruction, and interpretation at the site, as well as plans for the reinterment of the excavated remains in their original resting place.[25]

The exact plans for on-site interpretation and commemoration of the Nassau Street site are still in development. However, the church will decide several key factors of the landscape, including the way in which the cemetery is marked. They were also consulted in discussions between Colonial Williamsburg and the College of William & Mary in determining where the 18th-century Bray School building would be relocated. The First Baptist community supported placing the Bray School in the grassy lot just south of the church site, at the corner of Nassau and Francis Streets, and that is the location that was ultimately selected.

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[25] The decision to rebury the remains on-site was actually one of the earliest decisions made during the entire project. Before the presence of graves had even been confirmed, the community decided that *if* burials were located and *if* any were excavated, the individuals would be reburied in the location they had chosen for their final resting place.

Many Colonial Williamsburg staff, including much of the First Baptist crew, were initially opposed to placing the Bray School at this location. We felt that placing the school in such close proximity to the First Baptist Church and the African-American religion exhibit would further segregate the museum space. These three locations, the only three locations in the Historic Area specifically dedicated to interpreting Black history,[26] are now located on a single side street. However, this close physical proximity does hold great potential for future programming at these sites. Ultimately, support for the chosen location came from Colonial Williamsburg's president, the First Baptist community, demands by William & Mary pertaining to the building's proximity to the campus, and historic precedent – the second Bray School building was located in the adjacent lot, beneath the same parking lot that once covered the First Baptist site.

Since the beginning of the First Baptist excavation, both Colonial Williamsburg and the First Baptist community have hoped to learn enough from the archaeological work to reconstruct the earliest church structure. In February 2023, Colonial Williamsburg announced that they have committed to reconstructing the c.1805 church by 2026, the congregation's 250th anniversary (Colonial Williamsburg 2022). It has also promised that both the reconstructed church and the Bray School will be open to the public for free in perpetuity. The official announcement of this news came 40 years after the congregation first asked Colonial Williamsburg to reconstruct the church.

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[26] Rev. James Ingram, interview with author, March 21, 2023.

With the relocation of the Bray School in February 2022, this block is set to become a significant interpretive area for the experience of Black Williamsburg residents in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, it still does not address the 20th-century processes by which the Historic Area was created.

The story of the First Baptist Church is still ongoing. It is a story of perseverance, from 1776 when a group of enslaved individuals defied White control to meet and practice their faith. They continued to assert their humanity through the 19th and 20th centuries by continuing to meet and thrive despite legal sanctions, Jim Crow, and the encroachment of Colonial Williamsburg. Although I view the church's relocation as a process of displacement and dispossession, I also recognize that the congregation accepted Colonial Williamsburg's offer as a strategic move. In relinquishing the site of their original church building, they were able to expand and grow in a new location.

Nevertheless, the history of the church also includes the story of the Nassau Street site after the congregation relocated. It includes the destruction of the 1856 church building, the 1957 archaeological excavation, the construction of the parking lot, the creation of the museum landscape as the site was integrated into the Historic Area, and even the 2020-2023 excavation, in which the site is reimbued with its history and placed back in the hands of the current congregation. Finally, this story must look to the future and how the site is used to interpret all of these phases of history.

Silencing History at the First Baptist Church

Colonial Williamsburg, in the fashion of a true “colonial” power, has imposed a series of silences on the First Baptist Church site and on the Black community of Williamsburg. These silences were (and in some cases still are) created and upheld by intentionally-created narratives of the church’s relocation and by the physical landscape of the First Baptist site.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the most publicly-available histories of the Restoration are the photo books *Williamsburg Before and After* (Yetter 1988) and *Restoring Williamsburg* (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019). *Williamsburg Before and After* contains no mention whatsoever of the First Baptist Church and almost nothing on the experience of Williamsburg’s Black community. As a whole, it presents a nostalgic, whitewashed view of “the town that time passed by” (Yetter 1988:30). Yetter frames the Restoration as a “rebirth” and “reincarnation,” with no attention to negative impacts of the museum’s creation (1988:vii).

Restoring Williamsburg does provide some information on the Restoration’s impact on the Black community, but it is still very little. The lack of attention to Black history is clear in the way the book discusses the First Baptist Church. First Baptist is mentioned three times in the 99 pages devoted to the history of Williamsburg and the Restoration. The first mention is related to the 1834 tornado, where a “black meetinghouse” is listed as one of the buildings impacted (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019:31). The second mention is a captioned photo of the 1856 church[27] (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019:35). The caption reads:

> There was an African American Baptist congregation in Williamsburg from the time of the Revolution. In the early nineteenth century, members worshipped in a converted carriage house on the north side of Nassau Street that had been provided by the Cole family. That building was destroyed when a tornado swept through town in April 1834. In 1856 this brick church was erected and served as the congregation's home for a century until a new structure was erected on Scotland Street (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019:35).[28]

Several things about this caption are noteworthy. First, the church is not specifically named. This is very striking; the vast majority of photographed buildings are identified by name throughout the book. Second, the exact location of this building is not identified. The carriage house that temporarily housed the church is mentioned, but the location of the brick church is not. Third, the location of the carriage house is factually inaccurate. Nassau Street runs north to south; there is no "north side." The carriage house is actually on the east side of Nassau Street, and the brick church was on the west. Finally, the church's history ends with the construction of the Scotland Street church, but there is no mention of the demolition of the Nassau Street church or Colonial Williamsburg's role in its destruction.

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[27] The same image is included here as Figure 2.

[28] This excerpt reflects the narrative that was largely accepted before the 2020 excavations began. The primary history of the church (Bogger 2006) also references the carriage house as the first church building. Evidence for a separate structure comes from the Virginia Gazette article that lists the meeting house and carriage house as two separate structures (see Chapter 4). This theory is supported by the archaeological findings of the past few years.

The only time First Baptist Church is mentioned by name is in a very brief section on Black social venues before the Restoration: "members of the First Baptist Church, with direct links to a colonial congregation, worshipped in a brick church dedicated in 1856 on Nassau Street just off the main street (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019:82)." This sentence gives a specific location for the 1856 church but does not contain any new, significant information about the congregation. There certainly is no connection made to larger historical narratives.

This same section discusses the destruction of Black businesses, churches, and residences in the Historic Area. It notes that these structures were some of the earliest targeted by the Restoration, although it does not connect this phenomenon to racism in any way. Immediately after mentioning Colonial Williamsburg's role in the displacement of the Black community, the discussion turns from attributing blame to excusing and even praising the Foundation for "rebuild[ing] these institutions in clusters around the older center of black life" in other areas of town (Yetter & Lounsbury 2019:82-83). This paternalistic attitude implicitly excuses and supports the re-segregation of the town.

In addition to historic narratives of the Restoration, the demolition of the church building is the most obvious aspect of the erasure at the First Baptist site. The building's destruction and displacement of the congregation changed the physical and social landscapes of the town. Physically, a large and prominent structure was removed from view. Socially, the primarily Black congregation was displaced from the site. Of course, the community was not completely removed from either the town or the museum (Edwards-Ingram 2014). However, the large congregation no longer convened within the Historic Area for church services. Church members may have returned to the site as archaeologists; many Black residents displaced from the Historic Area were hired in similar capacities (Rowe 2000; Ellis 2000; Poole 2021). However, when the site was a church, the Black congregation was independent. As an archaeological site, the primarily-Black crew labored under the supervision of a White director and went unnamed and unacknowledged in museum records (Figure 7) (Poole 2021). In this way, the White institution gained control of the physical property and control over Black individuals' activities at the First Baptist site and in the Historic Area in general.

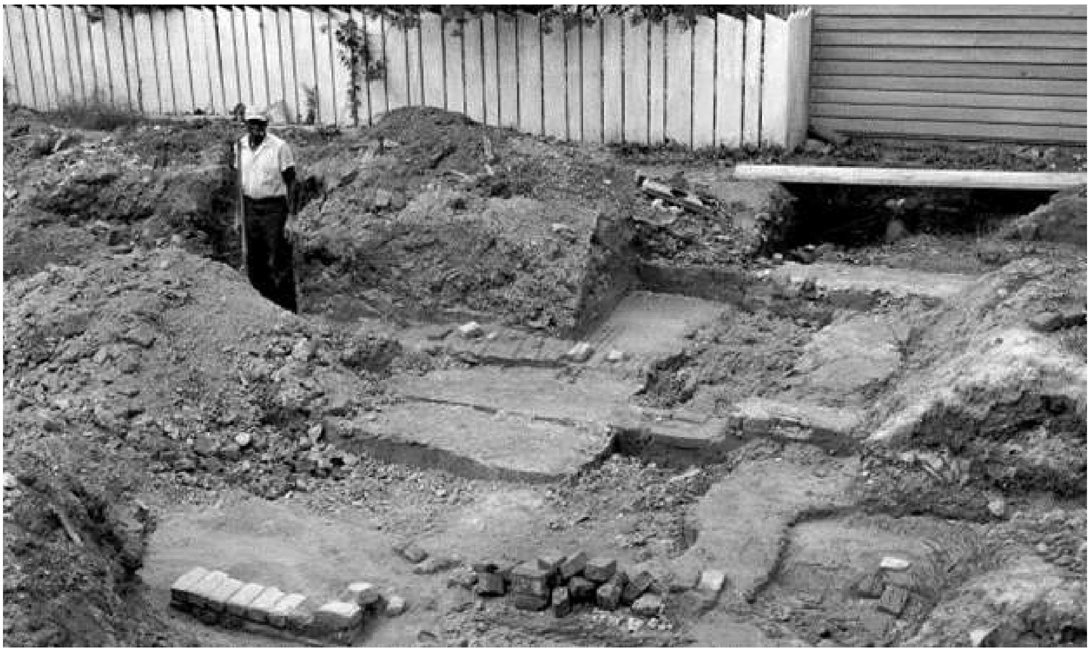

Figure 7: An archaeologist excavates the c.1805 and 1856 church foundations in 1957. This individual's name is not recorded in the excavation records. Photo from Colonial Williamsburg Special Collections, Rockefeller Library.

The legacy of this system of White control persists today. When the 1957 excavation is discussed today, the most commonly named individual is James (Jimmy) Knight. Knight was the supervising archaeologist at the First Baptist site working under Director of Archaeology Ivor Noël Hume. The 1957 archaeology contexts are referred to as "Jimmy Knight trenches" both in everyday speech and in official paperwork. Even the 2020 research design for the First Baptist project says that the 1957 excavations "were conducted by James Knight under the direction of Ivor Noel Hume" (Colonial Williamsburg 2020a:9). But the vast majority of those trenches were excavated by the mostly Black archaeology crew, not by Knight.[29] The archaeology department specifically depended on these “laborers” and “foundation diggers” in its efforts to locate and reconstruct historic structures, but their knowledge, experience, and skills were dismissed. These individuals were not named in research reports or photographs of excavations, and or the most part they have been overlooked by the Foundation ever since. It was only very recently that Senior Staff Archaeologist Meredith Poole initiated a project that attempts to identify these individuals and recognize them as archaeologists (Poole 2021).

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[29] Throughout this thesis, when I attribute actions to "Colonial Williamsburg," I am referring to the primarily White supervisory staff. I recognize that many Black individuals worked for the

Colonial Williamsburg’s control over the landscape and historical narrative is also manifested in the treatment of the site after the church building’s destruction. The conversion of the property into an archaeological site had both overt and hidden functions. Most explicitly, the excavations were an attempt to locate historic (18th-century) buildings for reconstruction. But the transformation from place of worship to archaeological excavation also served to incorporate the site into the museum landscape and fix it in the past (Olivier 2011; Trouillot 2015). The premise of searching for “historic” buildings beneath the church implies that the church itself is *not* historic or worthy of commemoration.

There is great discrepancy between what was found in the 1957 archaeological excavation and what was recorded. As discussed in Chapter 4, the 1957 excavation located the foundations of the c.1805 church but did not recognize it as such. They believed they had located two small 18th-century

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Foundation, including as archaeologists. However, I attribute the decision-making power (and responsibility for acts of violence) to the museum’s leaders.

buildings. Yet despite locating structures dating to the museum’s period of interest, the architects still did not see them as worthy of reconstruction.

The brick foundations of the original church were recorded, although misidentified. However, most of the material uncovered by the 1957 excavations was not recorded at all. No artifacts were collected by the museum, although it is possible that individual archaeologists kept some items. The most striking case of silencing in the 1957 excavation is the cemetery dominating the western portion of the site. The current project has found that dozens of graves were exposed by the 1957 archaeology trenches (Figure 8), although no burial features are mentioned in any records from that time.

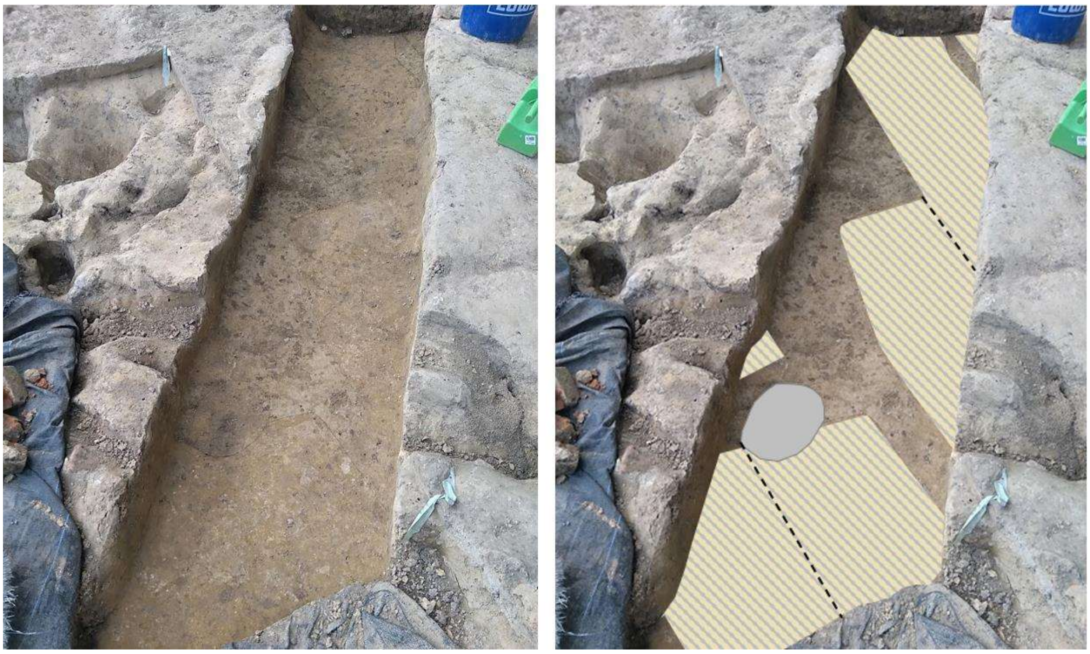

Figure 8: 1957 archaeology trench re-excavated in 2021. This section of trench cut through multiple graves (shaded areas on right). The gray polygon is a posthole. Photo by the author.

The depth of the trenches was not enough to reach the remains, but they did cut through the grave shafts. At first, there was some tentative hope among archaeologists in 2020 that the 1957 crew simply hadn't noticed the features; they were, after all, digging for brick foundations. But as it became clear just how many graves they had encountered, that optimism faded. In the summer of 2021, archaeologist Lauren McDonald and I were excavating a 1957 archaeology trench in the cemetery block. This trench was one of the few east-west trenches we had encountered, but it aligned roughly with the unscaled 1957 maps and was filled with 20th-century material identical to that recovered from other 1957 trenches. As excavation continued, we noted that this feature was deeper than other nearby trenches, and we became concerned that a grave might have been excavated in 1957. Unfortunately, we were correct. The east-west trench cut through grave fill and continued deeper, finally exposing subsoil, evidence of a wooden plank, and fragments of bone. This feature, although only partially exposed and excavated, is most likely evidence of grave-robbing and the removal of human remains to places unknown.

I use the term grave-robbing deliberately. Yes, the perpetrators were archaeologists. Yes, the grave was excavated as part of an archaeological project. But the excavation was not noted in the archaeological report; the presence of graves was not mentioned at all, despite the fact that the 1957 excavations encountered dozens of grave shafts in their trenches. And, of course, there is the issue of the remains themselves. If human remains were excavated (as it appears they were) there is no record of their removal or any indication of where they were taken once they were exhumed. This absence of information is another clear, deliberate act of silencing. If the official report did not mention burials, the burials did not exist. And if the burials did not exist, Colonial Williamsburg could still build its parking lot.

Colonial Williamsburg paved the church lot in 1965, and it remained a parking lot until the summer of 2020. The construction of the parking lot marked another transformation in the site's history. The parking lot, a blank space in the midst of the created historic landscape, implied absence and imparted invisibility. Its imposition disconnected the site from its history and from the active First Baptist community that still exists a few blocks away. In short, the archaeological excavations fixed the church site in the past, and the parking lot rendered it ahistorical.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Colonial Williamsburg created an African-American religion exhibit in 1997, fifteen years after the church asked to have the church reconstructed (Bogger 2006). The exhibit is located in the reconstructed Cole carriage house, which housed the church between c.1834-1856, but signage in the exhibit does not indicate the primary church location just across Nassau Street. Members of the First Baptist Church history committee do keep the exhibit stocked with brochures for the Scotland Street church, thus maintaining a connection between the current congregation and the history displayed in the exhibit.

An interpretive sign was also installed in the 1960s on the west side of Nassau Street, just south of the original church location. The sign mentions the preachers Moses and Gowan Pamphlet and a brief timeline of the church's history. It informs visitors that the brick church was in use until 1955, at which point "the congregation moved into new facilities on Scotland Street where it continues today." There is no mention of any connection to Colonial Williamsburg or the Restoration. There is also no explanation as to the fate of the church building.

The sign claims to mark the exact location of the church: "By 1818, and perhaps earlier, the 'African Church', as it was called, met *here* in a wooden building…" (emphasis added). However, the sign is actually located just past the church lot's southern boundary in a grassy field (Figure 9). The field was separated from the parking lot by a row of trees until 2020 and by a drainage ditch since 2021. The field, like the church site, was part of an active community until the 1950s and 1960s. Small houses owned by Eastern State Hospital stood on that lot until they, too, were purchased and razed by Colonial Williamsburg. Unlike the church lot, this area was never paved over. Instead, it was "restored" to green space.[30]

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[30] In February 2023, the historic Bray School building was moved from Scotland Street to this green space at the corner of Nassau and Francis Streets. The impacts of the Bray School's presence in this space are yet to be seen (see Chapter 6).

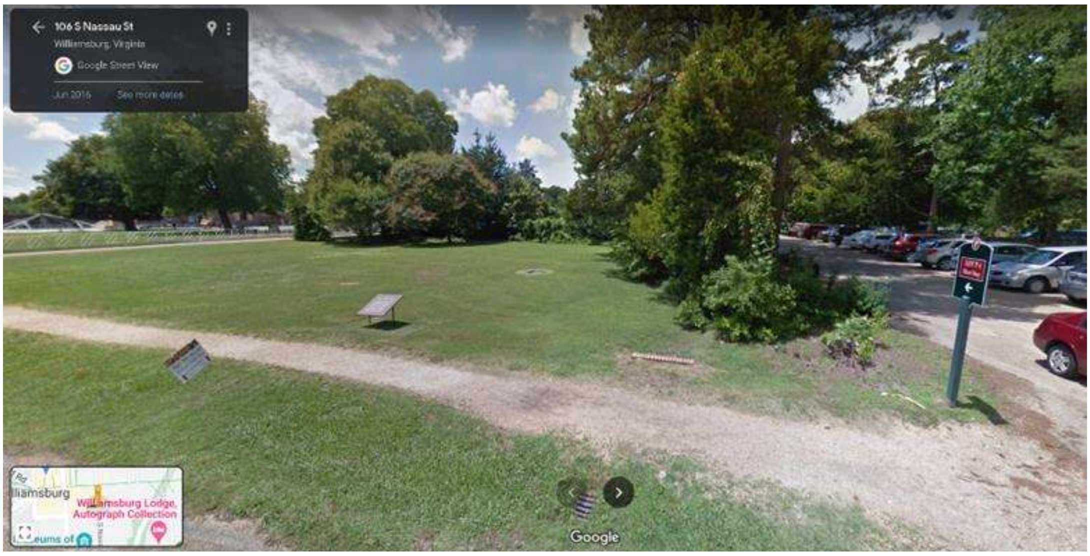
106 S Nassau St
Williamsburg, Virginia
Google Street View
Jun 2016
See more dates
Williamsburg
Williamsburg Lodge, Autograph Collection
Google

Figure 9: Google street view imagery from June 2016. Note the location of the interpretive sign in relation to the actual location of the church beneath the parking lot at the far right of the image.

The interpretive sign calls attention to the 18th- and 19th-century history of the church but displaces that history from its actual location. This allowed Colonial Williamsburg to imply for decades that the church's disappearance was a benign event; the congregation left quietly, and the site is memorialized as a peaceful green space. The invisibility of the parking lot is maintained, and the connections between the Restoration and the congregation's relocation are omitted.

The landscape, including the parking lot, religion exhibit, and interpretive sign, had a noticeable impact on visitors' perception of the site, and the misleading nature of the sign was not unnoticed by Colonial Williamsburg or by First Baptist descendants. The 1993 archaeological proposal highlights the discrepancy when it clarifies that "the earlier meeting house is unlikely to lie in the field to the south, as the marker would indicate, but rather under the 1855 church" (Moodey & Edwards 1993). Johnette Weaver remembers her maternal aunt, who attended the Nassau Street church, telling her that "the marker's not in the right place." Ms. Weaver used to park in the Nassau Street lot regularly and thought about the presence of the church each time: "I would be singing, 'they paved paradise, and put up a parking lot.'"[31]

Visitors to the First Baptist site were often confused by the placement of the sign and exhibit and would regularly ask why the excavation was not happening in the grassy area "where the church was." Others would express confusion, asking if the church was *here*, why is the religion exhibit *over there*? Many local residents and regular visitors recognized the site's history and primary value as a parking lot; more than a few complained about the loss of parking spaces.

Analysis of the First Baptist Church site reveals the ways in which White supremacy is written into the landscape itself. The museum landscape appeared to memorialize the First Baptist Church, but it actively silenced the history of displacement and allowed Colonial Williamsburg to coopt the church's history for its own purposes. However, the Restoration is not over. The Nassau Street site is currently an archaeological site, not a parking lot, and soon it will feature a reconstructed church. These changes resituate the site in historical significance and facilitate (re)connections with the current congregation.

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[31] Johnette Weaver, interview with author, April 10, 2023.

Undoing Silences and Looking to the Future

In the past 70 years, the First Baptist site on Nassau Street has been silenced and displaced by the museum landscape of Colonial Williamsburg. However, Colonial Williamsburg is now working to put the church back into the landscape. The removal of the parking lot and initiation of archaeological excavation in 2020 reinscribed historical significance onto the Nassau Street site. The highly-publicized archaeological project informed a global audience that the church's history was a priority in the museum and the Black history mattered. The partnership with the community indicates that Colonial Williamsburg is open to collaborative knowledge production and that descendants have the right to control narratives about their past.

As Chapters 4 and 5 indicate, renewed archaeological research at the Nassau Street site was a long time coming, with both the First Baptist congregation and Colonial Williamsburg expressing interest in such a project for decades before 2020. According to Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's Director of Archaeology, the current collaboration began around March 2020, in a meeting between representatives from First Baptist, Colonial Williamsburg, and Let Freedom Ring Foundation.[32] That meeting resolved that the community would form a steering committee to oversee the research design and archaeological work; however, as the project progressed the steering committee subsided in favor of a model of oversight by the descendant community as a whole.

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[32] Interview with author, March 15, 2023.

The First Baptist descendant community includes current members of the church, direct descendants of those who attended the Nassau Street church, and individuals from the wider Williamsburg community. It also includes members of Black churches from across Eastern Virginia, reflecting First Baptist Church's status as one of the earliest Black churches in the region from which many "daughter" churches split off.[33] The membership of the descendant community has expanded throughout the course of the project and, importantly, is defined by the community itself. This inclusive approach to recognizing descendants follows best practices established by the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Rubric *Engaging Descendant Communities in the Interpretation of Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites* (2018).

Community control over the research process is "more informal than formal," according to Jack Gary, and works mostly through information sharing directly with community leaders.[34] There was no written agreement or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for the project as a whole. However, an MOU was drafted in June 2021 to govern the burial excavation. Gary noted two things about this MOU. First, it gave the community control over exactly three burials, no more. A new MOU would have to be drafted if the community decided that further burial excavations should continue. And second, the MOU was written by a Colonial Williamsburg lawyer, who originally drafted it to protect the Foundation. After reading the draft, Gary had to send it back to the lawyer and explain (again) that the document was meant to protect the community's rights. After the MOU was re-drafted, it was reviewed, approved, and signed by the community.

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[33] Jack Gary, interview with author, March 15, 2023; Descendant testimony at community meeting, April 6, 2023.

[34] Interview with author, March 15, 2023.

The burial excavation was also the area in which the community exercised the most control over the research design and process. The main priority of the burial excavation, as determined by the community, was to establish whether the cemetery was definitively associated with the church, as opposed to the Civil War hospital. After the congregation had voted to proceed with excavating three graves, a closed meeting was held in which the parameters of research were fully established. This meeting established the protocols for the types of research that would be conducted on skeletal materials, how the excavation process would be documented and shared with the community, and how information would be curated after analysis (Poole 2022). The community also dictated who would have access to the site during the burial excavation and how the work would be marked ceremonially.

Except in the case of the burials, Gary and Poole said that the community has not actually asked for much in terms of specific research questions or designs.[35] The congregation has made small requests, such as asking for specific topics to be addressed at community meetings, but the biggest desire perceived by Gary and Poole was that the church wanted Colonial Williamsburg to make good on their promises during this project. It was more about Colonial Williamsburg making a commitment and that the Foundation, as Gary put it, "not 'be C.W. again' and do the things we've done in the past."[36] The results of the research matter, of course, but in some ways they are less important than simply proving that the Foundation will follow through.

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[35] Interview with author, March 15, 2023.

This sentiment is echoed by James Ingram, who characterizes the Restoration as a "wedge between Colonial Williamsburg and First Baptist" which has left "a lot of people with a lot of wounds."[37] Johnette Weaver still feels those wounds as she remembers that Black residents were excluded from meetings and decisions regarding Colonial Williamsburg "taking over the town."[38] She has mixed feelings about Colonial Williamsburg; as a former interpreter in the museum, she believes it is a valuable resource for Black community members to learn about history. Her three children all worked as junior interpreters at Colonial Williamsburg, which she believes empowered them by allowing them to command an audience and *tell* people (rather than passively be told) about history. But she also feels that people need to acknowledge the stories of displacement and the fact that Colonial

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[36] Interview with author, March 15, 2023.

[37] Interview with author, March 21, 2023.

[38] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.

Williamsburg paid “pennies on the dollar” to Black residents for property that is now worth millions.

Rev. Ingram sees the ongoing collaboration as a “medicine” which “miraculously has started to heal some of those wounds.” However, he emphasized that not everything can be healed so easily and that he has urged Colonial Williamsburg to “be careful. You got [the community’s] trust in you now. Don’t disappoint them. Whatever building you build, let them work with you to make sure they know what you’re doing every step of the way. And they’re doing it.”

Johnette Weaver had a more cynical view of the relationship between Colonial Williamsburg and the First Baptist project. While she is very pleased with the ongoing research and proud of the community’s accomplishments, she remains suspicious of Colonial Williamsburg’s motivations, saying that “it’s like they want to apologize without hurting White people’s feelings” by even mentioning the history of displacement. Colonial Williamsburg, Ms. Weaver told me, has had many opportunities to “stand up for us, for once.”[39] She referenced the nationwide controversy surrounding Critical Race Theory as well as other local issues, including Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin’s inclusion in festivities during the recent Bray School relocation. She also pointed out that Colonial Williamsburg officials have never sat down with the Black community to discuss the history of displacement and erasure in the museum, much less asked the community how they would like Colonial Williamsburg to start to repair that relationship. Those actions “would have helped heal the rift.”[40] Referencing the “wounds” within the African-American community, James Ingram also noted the lack of acknowledgement of the harm done: “I don’t think they [Colonial Williamsburg] ever had any type of reconciliation meeting or anything like they did to try to resolve some of these problems.”[41]

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[39] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.

Because Colonial Williamsburg has had so many opportunities to “stand up” for the community, Ms. Weaver does not believe that Colonial Williamsburg is primarily motivated by a desire to tell inclusive history. “I don’t think it’s altruistic,” she told me. “I would love for it to be heartfelt, I really would. But I don’t think so.”[42] Instead, “they [Colonial Williamsburg] have figured out that a lot of Black people have a lot of money” and have decided to “do something fantastic” at the First Baptist site, knowing that the good publicity will “enlarge the tourist pool.” That being said, she does believe that in some ways Colonial Williamsburg is “trying to do better.” Having worked as an interpreter for Colonial Williamsburg for several years, she also appreciates that many employees who “actually do the work” try every day to tell inclusive history.

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[40] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.

[41] Interview with author, March 21, 2023.

[42] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.

The community members with whom I spoke had a very positive view of the 2020-2023 excavation. They felt that they were welcome on the site and that the archaeologists and interpreters were welcoming and open about the work. But very little of our conversations focused on the research itself. Instead, the descendants tended to emphasize the importance of interpretation after the research ends. More than anything, they want to tell a more inclusive history, or as Jacquelyn Gardner put it, to:

> Tell the history of how this country was founded on the participation of this community – and the *total* community, not just part of the community. And to make sure that the history's told. If it's told in a good spirit, people will come to hear it … show the full history of how we were involved in the foundation of this country, so that when you hear it … it's not all the cruelty and it's not all the power structure (interview with author, March 16, 2023).

Dennis Gardner reiterated that the current project represents a move towards telling "the full story of the history of Williamsburg," not just history that reflects a "White mentality."[43] One descendant, a ministry leader and lifelong member of First Baptist Church, voiced similar sentiments that "people need to be aware of the full story" and "it has to come from all of us." As Christine Jordan put it, "we also have a story to tell. A story that began before the Restoration or Colonial Williamsburg."[44] Johnette Weaver emphasized that this story is not unknown, just untold by the museum: “You want to know something about our history? Come over here and ask us.”[45]

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[43] Interview with author, March 16, 2023.

[44] Personal communication, April 24, 2023.

Another descendant and church member emphasized that the story of First Baptist was one of perseverance, from the “humble beginnings of free Blacks and enslaved persons” meeting in the brush arbor to moving into town and building their own church.[46] Johnette Weaver had a similar view, noting the importance of First Baptist as a church founded and led by Black people, “not given by a White counterpart. That’s rare and different.”[47] Rev. Ingram is most excited for the future interpretive opportunities. Discussing the future of the site, he emphasized that this block – the church, the Bray School, and the religion exhibit:

> Will be the only African American focused buildings [in Colonial Williamsburg] that will be available to do the work [of interpreting Black history]. That’s, again, why it’s important that whatever they do to construct these buildings, or however they want to design these buildings, it has to be the most impact. It’s got to be done well, because, again, the community’s watching (James Ingram, interview with author, March 21, 2023).

The results of the 2020-2023 excavation, as well as the plans for the future, are very promising. In the next few years, the c.1805 church will be reconstructed on its original location. This will bring the First Baptist site into the Historic Area as a significant site worthy of intensive interpretation, rather than just an interpretive sign and small exhibit. Collaborative projects with the nearby Bray School will emphasize the persistence and resilience of the Black colonial and early national communities, and a renovated religion exhibit will tell a richer, fuller story of African-American spiritual heritage.[48]

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[45] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.
[46] Interview with author, March 22, 2023.
[47] Interview with author, April 10, 2023.

Still, there is something missing, not only from the Nassau Street site but from the Historic Area in general: the recognition of the museum's past wrongs. The current moment provides an opportunity to expand discussion to the 20th century and for Colonial Williamsburg to acknowledge the sins of its past. Since the beginning of the museum, Colonial Williamsburg has been intrinsically linked to processes of displacement, dispossession, and erasure, all of which overlay global systems of White supremacy. Ethical scholarship requires acknowledging the ways in which our discipline has enacted violence in the past (Willis 1969; Trouillot 1991; Trouillot 2015 [1995]; Franklin 1997; Blakey 2020; Beliso-de Jesús & Pierre 2020; Horning 2022). The ongoing project may be, as Jack Gary put it, a "physical effort to right a wrong in some way." But without specifically naming and taking accountability for the wrong that was done, can the museum truly work towards reconciliation?

I return now to Beliso-de Jesús and Pierre's criteria for an anthropology of White supremacy (2020). At Colonial Williamsburg, this will entail open and honest interpretation of the history of slavery, the history of racial classification, Jim Crow laws, and ultimately the displacement of Black communities during the creation of the museum. The role of White supremacy in the history of First Baptist Church (and Colonial Williamsburg, America, and the world) must be made explicit and public. At the First Baptist site, the story of the congregation's displacement should be incorporated into historic interpretation and referenced by interpretive infrastructure alongside other aspects of the site's history.

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[48] James Ingram, interview with author, March 21, 2023.

I do not have the power to make these interpretive decisions in the museum; I can only speak for myself. And I do not know if Colonial Williamsburg will ever decide to speak openly about these issues. Such declarations would risk alienating conservative donors. Still, there will come a point at which Colonial Williamsburg will have to decide whether avoiding admitting wrongdoing is worth sacrificing their ethical responsibility to acknowledge the role of White supremacist structures in the history of the museum.

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